

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Lebanon's Jewish Community: Fragments of Lives Arrested by Salameh

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Finally, what are the main theoretical and scholarly implications of this study? This study has drawn on the rich intellectual tradition of historical sociology (HS). HS locates actors (such as Hezbollah) within their context. It attempts to understand the genesis of actors, their motivations and the constraints and opportunities they face as they try to realize their goals. It takes history seriously so to show how actors socializes over time in contexts not of their own choosing. This socialization places actors in relation to others, events and goals. It reveals both the intended goals of actors and the unintended outcomes that they may generate. (214)

Be that as it may, *Hezbollah: Socialisation and Its Tragic Ironies* does not look to the future or offer any suggestions or forecasts about it. Still, the book does contain some interesting insights into the options now facing Hizballah and its limited choices, given the Gordian knot binding the organization to Iran. As the author points out, “Having secured, for the medium to long term, a strong position in Lebanon, Hezbollah will continue to use it as a springboard to advance its and Iran’s strategy in the region” (212). However, from here on out, what happens will depend upon what Iran and Shi‘i communities of Lebanon and the surrounding countries do.

In conclusion, this is an important and interesting book that should be read by anyone wanting to understand the Hizballah phenomenon. The reader will find keys to understanding the path the organization has taken, its worldview, its behavior, and the sources of its success in recent decades, as well as the difficulties and challenges confronting it at present.

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Franck Salameh

Lebanon’s Jewish Community: Fragments of Lives Arrested

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Histories of Jews in the Middle East have received much recent scholarly attention. Some historians have sought to challenge a narrative of continuous

Jewish oppression under Islamic rule, while others importantly have looked to “provincialize Zionism” in the histories of Jewish communities in the Arab world beyond Palestine.¹

Franck Salameh’s new monograph, *Lebanon’s Jewish Community: Fragments of Lives Arrested*, contributes to this growing field of scholarship documenting alternative histories of Jews in the Middle East. His focus is the Jewish community of Lebanon, which comprised an estimated 14,000 individuals at its height.² Building on much recent scholarship on this population, Salameh succeeds in integrating Lebanon’s Jewish story into broader Lebanese history using a wide range of archival sources, family papers, and oral histories.

Salameh puts forward at least three related arguments. First, he seeks to restore the history of Jews to Lebanese memory. The erasure of Jews from the Lebanese collective memory, he writes, “shall read like a travesty of history” (75). He recovers both the “rise” and “fall” of Lebanon’s Jewish community, detailing the thriving Jewish institutions under French mandatory rule as well as the “silent exodus” of Lebanese Jews in 1948–75 (75). Salameh calls on the contemporary Lebanese community to listen and remember this history, to “redeem” themselves, bring back from oblivion and retribute a suppressed and forgotten facet of their history” (43). Second, Salameh argues that the Jews played a central role in the establishment of modern Lebanon—even if “discreet and low-pitched” (47). They were invested in building and participating in a “confederation of minorities” in the early twentieth century. To Salameh the fate of the Jewish community over the twentieth century coincides with the rise and fall of a pluralistic Lebanon. Lebanese Jews, he writes, were an “ancient and venerable community” that was “bruised and degraded in a modern Lebanon that has lost its bearings” (24). Third, Salameh argues that the Jews of Lebanon were unique among their co-religionists in Middle Eastern countries, just as Lebanon itself was unique (188). For example, the pattern of Jewish emigration from Lebanon in the second half of the twentieth century did not mirror that of its neighbors in the region.

1. See Orit Bashkin, “The Middle Eastern Shift and Provincializing Zionism,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 3 (2014): 577–80.
2. This figure is cited in Kirsten E. Schulze, *The Jews of Lebanon: Between Coexistence and Conflict* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2001), 4–8. See also Laura Zittrain Eisenberg, *My Enemy’s Enemy: Lebanon in the Early Zionist Imagination, 1900–1918* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), and Tomer Levi, *The Jews of Beirut: The Rise of a Levantine Community, 1860s–1930s* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

Lebanon's Jewish Community comprises two main parts. Following an introduction, the first part (chapters 2–4) provides an informative, loosely chronological political and social history of early to mid-twentieth-century Lebanon through the lens of its Jews. This research draws from the secondary works of Kirsten E. Schulze and Laura Zittrain Eisenberg as well as from archival sources, family papers, and published newspapers accessed in Lebanon, France, and the United States. The second part, chapters 5–6, provides rich oral history testimonies by Lebanese Jews and Christians conducted in Lebanon, France, Israel, and Mexico.

Chapter 2 focuses largely on the strong relationship between Jews and Christians (particularly Maronites) in French-mandate Lebanon. The Jewish-Maronite relationship, Salameh writes, seemed to be a “natural bond” (37) and a two-sided “romance” (25). The Maronite Patriarch Antony Peter Arida,³ head of the community from 1932 to 1955, was commonly known in Lebanon as the “Patriarch of the Jews” (25). He maintained pro-Jewish stances in Lebanon and advocated for the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine. In turn, Jews were also involved with Maronite institutions on the ground: they gave to Maronite charities, studied at Maronite parochial schools, and “were conspicuously present and active in distinctly Maronite political parties,” especially the Kataeb (Phalanges) party (37–38).

Chapter 3 continues the story of the Jewish-Maronite “romance” of the early twentieth century. Salameh argues that Lebanese Jews, like Lebanese Maronites, were far more invested in a Lebanese Republic comprising a “confederation of minorities” rather than an “Arab state” in the making” (47). Both Jews and Maronites, Salameh continues, advocated for a unique “Lebanonism”—a “secular, multiethnic, multi-confessional” vision of Lebanese identity, which was not exclusively “Arab” (49). This narrative at times romanticizes Lebanon under the French Mandate as a “fleeting moment” of “tolerance and pacifism and diversity and multiplicity” (57). It may have been helpful to add a discussion here about French colonial policies that exacerbated sectarianism in the country by setting up a political regime that favored Maronite rule. Importantly, Salameh chronicles not only the “rise” of Lebanon’s Jewish community and its prosperity under the mandate, but also its decline. The major exodus of Jews from Lebanon did not take place as an immediate response to the Arab-Israeli conflict following the 1948 war, as it did elsewhere in the region. Although the rise of Zionism in Palestine and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 did shake

3. Also spelled in the book as Anthony and Antoine Pierre.

the political confidence and security of Lebanon's Jewish community—as Salameh skillfully traces through a close reading of the Jewish community's newspaper *Al-'Alam al-Isra'ili* (translated as "The Israelite Universe")—the 1948 war did not spell the end of Jewish life in Lebanon. In fact, the Jewish population increased in Lebanon following 1948 with the influx of Jews arriving from countries like Iraq and Syria.

The dissolution of the Lebanese Jewish community occurred more gradually amid the growing political upheaval in Lebanon in the 1950s and 1960s. Salameh blames the rise of Arab nationalism as the predominant force that resulted in the "liquidation of Middle Eastern cosmopolitan societies"—one of which was the Lebanese Jewish community (47–48). Indeed Salameh writes that Arab nationalism's most immediate targets in Lebanon were Jews: "their expulsion was . . . a given of Arab nationalism" (48).

In particular, the rising presence of Palestinian national forces in Lebanon, and the weakening Christian grip in the government, led many Jews to emigrate. Although, as Salameh argues, the Jewish-Maronite alliance helped protect Lebanon's Jewish community during the 1948 war in Palestine, the relationship did not survive Lebanon's mid-century political upheavals. The Maronite leadership, he writes, eventually "forfeited their obligations to Lebanese Jews" in the face of rising Arab nationalism (107). The watershed year was 1967, following the Six-Day War, when about half of the remaining Jewish population left Lebanon. By the 1970s, Salameh writes, acts of violence and vandalism against Lebanon's Jewish community was an almost daily occurrence (68). Leaders like Yasser Arafat and Kamal Jumblatt would denounce such attacks by "'violent extremists,' without ever calling them by their names" (69). The rise of the PLO as a major military and political force in the 1970s was "the nail in the coffin of Lebanese Jewish life" (99), according to Salameh. Jews continued to leave amid the Lebanese Civil War, and by 1980 the Jewish community comprised only about 200 individuals. While Judaism is still one of the officially recognized sects in Lebanon today, and some claim that the Jewish population is in fact sizeable, few outward expressions of Jewish life in Lebanon remain.⁴

The voices of Lebanese Jews themselves appear predominantly in chapters 5 and 6. These chapters provide lengthy oral history testimonies of Jews who lived in Lebanon and of Christians who remembered their presence. The oral histories also include the voices of women which are largely absent in earlier

4. The renovation of the Magen Avraham synagogue in Beirut is perhaps an interesting case for further study on this question.

chapters. The interviewees provide first-hand accounts of daily Jewish life in Lebanon, including memories of their schools, vacations, market activities, and neighborhood life, particularly in the Beirut Jewish neighborhood of Wadi Boujmil. The interviewees also narrate their personal stories of emigration from Lebanon. Many left due to violence while others emigrated in search of educational and economic opportunities elsewhere. Most ended up in North America and Europe, while some opted to live in Israel. In general, the Jewish interviewees—the “banished children of Lebanon” (115), as Salameh calls them—confirm the nostalgic narrative that Salameh sets out to record. As one interviewee Batia Sasson stated, “We love Lebanon of course. . . . But at the same time Lebanon broke our hearts” (146).

Chapter 6 provides testimonies of Lebanese Maronite interviewees. Salameh describes his own upbringing in a Maronite family in East Beirut and his memories of Jewish neighbors who lived downstairs (186). The Lebanese Jewish and Maronite interviewees alike emphasize the Jewish community’s similarity to other groups in Lebanon. As one Maronite woman Georgette told Salameh: “The Jews were Lebanese, like any others” (192). While these interviews provide the reader with rich details of daily Jewish life in Lebanon, Salameh’s analysis could have been sharpened by using critical theories on memory and nostalgia.⁵

Overall, Salameh’s writing is accessible and informative, but at times editorializing. Salameh’s general tone is admittedly nostalgic for the “better days” of a multicultural mandatory Lebanon dominated by Maronite voices. He also quite forcefully condemns the “fires of Arab nationalist activism” that consumed Lebanon in the 1950s for “dismantling the ‘confederation of minorities’” established in the country (58–59). Salameh’s decision to focus specifically on Jewish-Christian relations in Lebanon is unsurprising in light of his own scholarly interests in Lebanese nationalism and Lebanese Christians. But by focusing so singularly on Jewish-Christian relations and largely overlooking Jewish relations with other confessional groups, Salameh’s narrative at times neglects to acknowledge the region’s long-standing cultural, intellectual, economic, and linguistic ties to other parts of the Muslim and Arab world.

Some readers may find the book more useful as a history of Lebanon (and specifically Christian Lebanon) through the lens of its Jewish residents rather than as a detailed history of the Jewish community in Lebanon. The strength of this approach is that Salameh crucially contextualizes the Jewish

5. For an example of a recent work on nostalgia, see Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books 2002); and for an analysis of memory, see Susan Slyomovics, *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

community that is too often isolated in the scholarship.⁶ The weakness is that the picture of the Jewish community in Lebanon remains, as acknowledged in the book's subtitle, fragmented. Readers interested in the specifics of the Jewish community in Lebanon may be left wondering, for example: How did class divisions affect the Jewish community? What were the relations between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews in Lebanon? What connections existed between Jewish organizations in Lebanon and those in neighboring countries? What were Jewish relations with the multitude of non-Christian confessional groups during and following the French Mandate? As noted, the voices of Muslims and Palestinian Arabs are largely absent.

Ultimately, Salameh's book supports Kirsten Schulze's thesis that the Jews of Lebanon experienced a different historical trajectory than did their co-religionists in other Middle Eastern countries. Such claims to uniqueness naturally bring up questions of comparison. Historians have shown, for example, how many Jews in countries like Iraq similarly prospered alongside their Muslim and Christian neighbors in the early twentieth century and often formed part of the bourgeois class that worked with the colonial government. We might then ask: in what ways, on the ground, did Jews in Lebanon experience life differently than Jews in neighboring Middle Eastern countries? And how did the experiences of Lebanon's Jews compare with those of Jews under French colonialism elsewhere? Bringing together studies like Salameh's with the now wealth of studies on Jews in distinct Middle Eastern countries, using a comparative approach, may greatly enrich our understanding of this important topic.

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6. See Akram Khater's review of Tomer Levi, *The Jews of Beirut* in *The Levantine Review* 3, no. 2 (Winter 2013).