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Book Review:

Memory, Identity, and Reconciliation in Lebanon: A Review of Rabah, Makram, *Conflict on Mount Lebanon: The Druze, the Maronites and Collective Memory*. Edinburgh University Press, 2020.

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Henry Laurens once remarked: “Si vous avez compris quelque chose au Liban, c’est qu’on vous l’a mal expliqué” (“If you’ve understood anything about Lebanon, it’s because it was explained to you badly.”). It follows, then, if you think you understand Lebanon, you in fact understand nothing at all. In *Conflict on Mount Lebanon: The Druze, the Maronites and Collective Memory*, Makram Rabah seeks to improve our understanding of Lebanon’s complex history by examining how collective memories continue to shape communal identity, political behavior, and conflict in the absence of a meaningful national reconciliation process. By introducing oral history as a methodology to reconstruct the 1982 conflict between the Druze and the Maronites, Rabah challenges readers to move beyond the common frameworks that have long dominated historical scholarship on Lebanon’s civil violence. Rather than attributing the conflict primarily to external factors and contemporary geopolitical events, he draws on the nuance of oral histories, which empower individual voices of collective remembrance that can be lost in more traditional primary sources. Ultimately, Rabah aims to show how collective memory powerfully shapes Lebanon’s past, present, and future.

The book’s use of collective memory to study the Druze-Maronite conflict draws upon Maurice Halbwachs’s theory that memory is socially constructed within societal groups. Rabah adopts this foundation but departs from a strict Halbwachsian model by emphasizing that while individuals remain the “vessels” of remembrance, the meanings attached to those memories are interpreted, reshaped, and mobilized by communal centers of power “to serve a certain purpose.” In other words, Rabah rejects the primordial nature of Druze and Maronite identities, arguing instead that they shift depending on the agendas of political actors and the circumstances they respond to. Left unreconciled, these competing narratives become enduring obstacles to national reconciliation and increase the potential for future conflict. Rabah supports this assertion by pointing to earlier conflicts between these two communities dating back to the mid-nineteenth century that have shaped identities and perceptions of the other through more recent events, including the Mountain War.

It is here that Rabah’s broader theme of national reconciliation contributes to the wider field of Lebanon’s post-war governance studies. If Rabah is correct that collective memory is neither static nor merely descriptive, but a dynamic and evolving force in constructing communal identities, then his argument extends well beyond the historiography of the 1982 war: political institutions may distrib-

ute political power, but without creating the space to confront the collective memories that shape communal identity, they cannot by themselves produce lasting national reconciliation. Lebanon's post-war governance structure reflects precisely this link between memory and the unhealed traumas of its past. Rabah's work thus provides an important theoretical framework for understanding why these governance failures persist — one that converges with the argument I made in a 2018 essay published by the Wilson Center, that Lebanon's greatest post-war failure was not simply its inability to reform its political institutions, but its failure to cultivate a shared national identity, leaving the Taif Agreement's end to violence unmatched by any resolution of the competing historical narratives that continued to define political life through sectarian affiliation rather than a common civic consciousness. Consequently, Rabah's contribution extends beyond the history of the war by identifying collective memory as a critical but overlooked dimension of post-war governance and a factor in preventing the establishment of a shared future narrative for the country's peace and stability.

This viewpoint leads to the book's contribution to the wider field of Druze studies. By examining the historical construction of Druze narratives throughout the Levant under distinct political expressions, Rabah's framework also points toward a promising avenue for future research: how the collective memory now being constructed around the July 2025 Suwayda massacres — in which the new regime's armed forces, supported by Bedouin militias — all Sunnis — launched an assault against the Druze in the governorate amid Syria's post-Assad transition, killing more than 1,700 people, according to the United Nations' Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic — will come to shape the prospects for Druze reconciliation and integration within the Syrian state.

With respect to Druze history, however, some of the references in Chapters Two and Three offer a conventional Sunni Islamic context, which may prove misleading for readers unfamiliar with Druze narratives. While these examples do not detract from Rabah's thesis, more careful historical nuance would have strengthened the work. For example, Rabah accepts, as many other historians have, the conventional account that the Shihab Emirs were Sunni Muslim from the very beginning of their rule over Mount Lebanon in 1697 — a claim not supported by

contemporary primary and archival sources.¹ Reproducing this account without qualification omits the Druze community's actual claim to the Shihab emirate at its founding, and understates Druze standing within Mount Lebanon's political hierarchy during this formative period.

Finally, one strength of Rabah's methodology is his examination of how political leadership transmits and reshapes collective memory across generations. This is particularly evident in his treatment of the Gemayel family, where he traces the evolution of Maronite political identity from Pierre Gemayel to Bashir Gemayel and later to his brother Amin, demonstrating how each leader reinterpreted inherited narratives in response to changing political realities on the ground. Yet this same analytical depth is less evident in his treatment of the Arslan family. While Emir Majid Arslan and his son Emir Faisal Arslan occupy leading roles within the traditional Yazbaki Druze camp, the transition between their leadership and its implications for Yazbaki political identity within the Druze narrative receives comparatively less attention. Rabah establishes Faisal's close alliance with Bashir Gemayel and the Lebanese Forces, as well as his opposition to the Jomblatt camp, but does not fully explore how that political choice was subsequently remembered within the Druze collective memory. How did Faisal's alliance with Bashir affect the Druze narrative following the violence of the Mountain War? Did the consequences of that alliance contribute to the subsequent marginalization of the Yazbaki political tradition within the Druze community? A deeper examination of these questions could have revealed another dimension of how political choices become embedded in collective memory and, in turn, reshape a community's political identity and internal power relations.

In conclusion, Rabah has filled an important gap in the academic literature and made a significant contribution to how scholars and students of Lebanon understand the ever-evolving construction of Lebanese identity. Patriotism does not require perfection. More than three decades after the famous Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi wrote "...history is not merely a search for knowledge. It is also a search for understanding; and the house of understanding has many mansions" (234), Rabah invites us to consider whether a common vision of Lebanon's future can emerge from the many memories that have shaped its past.

¹ For example, Sharaf al-Din and Qasim Shihab are mentioned in an Ottoman document dated 28 August 1574 as Druze *muqaddams*; see *Mühimme Defteri* 26, no. 488, translated in Abdul-Rahim Abu-Husayn, *The View from Istanbul: Ottoman Lebanon and the Druze Emirate* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris in association with the Centre for Lebanese Studies, 2004), 26–27.

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