

MIRROR OF THE ARAB WORLD: LEBANON IN CONFLICT¹REVIEWED BY MAJOR RONEN SHOR²

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”³

I. Introduction

The president of a little Middle-Eastern country was about to finish his term of office. Embroiled in disagreement on a new candidate, feuding clans drove this wounded country into further chaos. A dysfunctional government turned to its national army to maintain order and intervene in the incidents of violence. The military, plagued with the same rivalries as the nation it served, decided to step aside and refrain from entering the political and cultural squabble. As a last resort, the chief of staff was appointed, as a bipartisan and a compromise nominee, to the highest office.

This episode, which occurred in 1958,⁴ was repeated exactly fifty years later in the wrecked country of Lebanon, when General Michel Suleiman was elected by the deputies of the parliament as president “[a]fter 18 months of grinding political conflict.”⁵

II. Background

Like Sisyphus, the infamous character of Greek mythology, Lebanon was condemned for its sins to spend eternity rolling a big boulder to the top of its mountains (either real or fabled), only to have it roll down again and again. Is it indeed a cursed fate? Sandra Mackey, a veteran journalist who holds a Master’s degree in International Affairs from the University of Virginia, rejects this thought in her new book.

¹ SANDRA MACKEY, *MIRROR OF THE ARAB WORLD: LEBANON IN CONFLICT* (2008).

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³ 1 GEORGE SANTAYANA, *THE LIFE OF REASON* (Scribner’s 2d ed. 1905).

⁴ MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 62–64.

⁵ Robert Worth, *Lebanon Elects President to Ease Divide*, N.Y. TIMES, May 26, 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/26/world/middleeast/26lebanon.html>.

Mackey, who spent four years in Saudi Arabia, is “fascinated”⁶ with the Arab world and writes with a lot of sympathy to the ordinary citizens among those societies. The author tries to use Lebanon to exemplify the current state, and foreseeable future, of the entire Middle-East region.⁷ She does so by analyzing its bloody past, widening the public’s understanding, and enriching the reader’s insight. Has the author succeeded in her complicated mission? A thoughtful study of her work reveals a complex answer.

III. Analysis

Mackey—in the best part of her book—interweaves sights and voices by juxtaposition of fantastic scenes beside fanatic clans, and by the depiction of serenity adjacent to chaos. Thus she takes the reader on a long journey inside the ancient past of the Arab world. With in-depth insights into history, Mackey contends that the seeds of the grim present were planted long ago: during Islam’s historic development, and in the basic structure of Arab society.⁸

Lebanon, also known as the Cedars’ Land, has four million citizens and consists of a diverse collection of tribes, sects and religions: Christian, Druze, Greek Orthodox, Sunni, and Shia.⁹ Every faction has been self-interested,¹⁰ considered itself as the only legitimate power in reign,¹¹ and never tried to “[find] a common identity.”¹² As a result, the country deteriorated into destructive struggles and total chaos, especially during the civil war, which began in 1975 and lasted fifteen years.¹³

Lebanon—as Mackey’s convincing thesis reiterates¹⁴—failed to achieve its basic role as a sovereign state: to serve the general public and

⁶ MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 268.

⁷ *Id.* at 12.

⁸ *Id.* at 15–39, 128.

⁹ *Id.* at 29.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 37.

¹¹ See BERNARD LEWIS, *THE MULTIPLE IDENTITIES OF THE MIDDLE EAST* 139 (1998).

¹² MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 47.

¹³ *Id.* at 100.

¹⁴ The author unfolded this theme in detail in another book that she published two years earlier. See SANDRA MACKEY, *LEBANON: A HOUSE DIVIDED* (2006).

strive for the “common good.”¹⁵ Despite gaining its independence in 1946, Lebanon struggles against internal and external entities which threaten to further weaken the fragile country.¹⁶ Indeed, the problems of this country are rooted in its clan-divided heritage and dysfunctional government.¹⁷ Since Lebanon is considered the most open society in the Arab world due to its liberal and independent press, it seems that Thomas Jefferson’s preference of the media over the government has never been realized so miserably.¹⁸

Still, some bothersome thoughts surface while reading about the case of Lebanon. The first relates to the passive position that the Lebanese citizens adopted through the never-ending chaos. One wonders why the disenfranchised, humble, and plain people have not risen up against the stalemate situation. Why have they not tried to control their fate, as many other nations did in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s? Given the relatively liberal characteristics of the Lebanese society,¹⁹ this question becomes more intense. Perhaps the answer lies in the different character of the Arab society, which is rooted more in the confessional and the clan than in the state.²⁰

Given the tremendous differences among the diverse beliefs and affiliations,²¹ another thought arises: Is the Lebanese country entitled to be a unified one? Does any justification exist to preserve the current structure of this fragile country?²² Detailed discussion of this complex and sensitive subject exceeds this review.

¹⁵ MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 100, 253; *id.* at 226 (“rather than representing the collective will of a nation, survived as a fragile shell within which the sects could conduct combat”).

¹⁶ *E.g.*, *id.* at 104, 242.

¹⁷ *See supra* notes 9–13 and accompanying text.

¹⁸ “[A]nd were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” THE BEST LETTERS OF THOMAS JEFFERSON 26 (J.G. Hamilton ed., The Riberside Press Cambridge 1926).

¹⁹ MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 226; *see* BERNARD LEWIS, THE MIDDLE EAST: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LAST 2,000 YEARS 347 (Scribner 2003) (1995).

²⁰ MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 44, 57–59, 62, 102; *id.* at 130 (“to most Arabs, it is better to live in tyranny than risk chaos”). The author uses the term “confessional group,” synonymous with “communal,” or sectarian, group. *See, e.g., id.* at 34–35.

²¹ *See generally* ALEXANDER YAKOBSON & AMNON RUBINSTEIN, ISRAEL AND THE FAMILY OF NATIONS: JEWISH NATION-STATE AND HUMAN RIGHTS (2003) (discussing the formal definitions of self-determination).

²² *E.g.*, MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 115.

Nevertheless, Lebanon embodies the protagonist in this narrative to serve the main thesis underlying the book. According to Mackey, Lebanon illustrates the same plights that afflict the entire Arab world. The common characteristics are “tribalism defined by family, clan, and confessional; borders often drawn by others; young, fragile national entities frequently created by colonial powers; the bitter contest between the Israeli state and the Palestinians; traditional societies reluctant to change; rule by elites that ignore the common good; [and] collusion and intrusion of foreign powers”²³

Indeed, “[f]rom an airliner approaching the eastern Mediterranean,”²⁴ the theory that the Arab states share a common distress appears persuasive. Yet the advantage and strength of the book also reveals its deficiency. Mackey mentions the “conditions and challenges in the Arab world that vary in intensity from one country to another.”²⁵ However, the journalistic style²⁶ and the overall vision of the book weaken this argument. Lebanon is unique in its history, culture, and components. Substantive differences distinguish the Lebanese country from its fellow Arab countries. The existence of a few large minorities, especially of Christians who reside next to (and interlock with) an equal Muslim component, distinguishes considerably the cultural and political experience of Lebanon.²⁷ This unique diversity underpins the worn-out land’s main problem, an argument that is intertwined throughout the book.²⁸

Comparison of the political situation of Lebanon with those of other Arab states yields a considerable gap. While Lebanon has been

²³*Id.* at 253; *id.* at 14 (“the endemic problems of Lebanon are the same as those of other Arab countries”).

²⁴*Id.* at 253.

²⁵*Id.* at 254.

²⁶ The journalistic style apparently contributed to some factual and historical mistakes. For example, the election in Israel was held in May 1999, instead of December 1999. *Id.* at 179. *Contra* HOWARD SACHAR, A HISTORY OF ISRAEL: FROM THE RISE OF ZIONISM TO OUR TIME 1014 (3d ed. 2007). The president of Syria, Hafez Assad, died in 2000, not 2002, an inconsistency in the book itself. MACKAY, *supra* note 1, at 188, 207.

²⁷ MACKAY, *supra* note 1, at 13, 29, 131, 225; *see* LEWIS, *supra* note 19, at 347; LEWIS, *supra* note 11, at 100.

²⁸ MACKAY, *supra* note 1, at 68; *see* Michael Lukas, *Studying Lebanon to Unlock Middle East*, S.F. CHRON., Mar. 22, 2008, at E-2, available at <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/03/22/DDS8V6KL6.DTL&feed=rss.books> (reviewing MACKAY, *supra* note 1); Rory Miller, *Mirror View Fails to Reflect Lebanon’s Unique Position*, SUNDAY BUS. POST ONLINE, Apr. 19, 2008, <http://archives.tc.ie/businesspost/2008/04/27/story32264.asp> (reviewing MACKAY, *supra* note 1).

embedded in endless maelstrom and its “government” is a hollow phrase, other states in the Middle East enjoy stability.²⁹ In fact, the only Arab country in the region who shares a common fate, Iraq, suffers from the same inherent problems, primarily because of large rival minorities.³⁰

Mackey portrays a detailed, terrifying chronology and accuses the countries and clans who were involved in the chaos of parochialism. One of those entities is Israel. Its role in Lebanon’s turmoil is analyzed here in two ways: first, its responsibility to the Palestinian plight as a direct aftermath of Israel’s foundation,³¹ and second, its incursions into Lebanon responding to Palestinians’ attacks from Lebanon.³² In fact, the first role provides a background for the second,³³ but also explains the Arabs’ anger toward Israel and the West.³⁴ Unfortunately, Mackey adopts the Arab version of the historical events that preceded Israel’s foundation.³⁵ The author uses the glossary of Israel’s enemies, referring to it several times as the “Zionist,”³⁶ country, referring to Tel Aviv as its capital city,³⁷ and hurling harsh words toward Israel and the Zionist movement.³⁸

²⁹ President Mubarak has reigned in Egypt for more than twenty-five years. Egypt State Information Service – Resume, <http://www.sis.gov.eg/En/Politics/Presidency/President/Resume/040105010000000001.htm> (last visited Jan. 13, 2009). The Hashemite dynasty has controlled Jordan for more than half a century. King Abdullah II Official Website, http://www.kingabdullah.jo/main.php?main_page=0&lang_hmka1=1 (last visited Jan. 13, 2009). Assad’s family has been responsible for Syria for more than thirty years. MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 188, 207.

³⁰ MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 98–99.

³¹ *Id.* at 72–74.

³² *Id.* at 187, 190.

³³ *Id.* at 96, 186.

³⁴ *E.g. id.* at 12, 73–74, 187.

³⁵ See MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 76–82. *But see* YACOBSON & RUBINSTEIN, *supra* note 21. See generally SACHAR, *supra* note 26, at chs. I–XIII.

³⁶ *E.g.*, MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 202, 204. Instead of the proper usage, the Arabs used to refer to Israel as the Zionist state, in order to avoid “recognizing” its existence, and to remind others of its ideologist roots. See Khaled Meshaal, *We Shall Never Recognize*, LA TIMES, Feb. 1, 2006, available at <http://articles.latimes.com/2006/feb/01/opinion/oe-meshaal1>; Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan, *Qazi Warns Against Recognizing Zionist State of Israel*, <http://jamaat.org/news/2005/may/20/1001.html> (last visited Jan. 17, 2009).

³⁷ *E.g.*, MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 169, 174, 187. The capital of Israel is Jerusalem. *E.g.*, CIA—The World Factbook—Israel, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/is.html> (last visited Jan. 13, 2009).

³⁸ *E.g.*, MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 74 (“Originally dispossessed by Zionism”); *id.* at 79 (“the Zionist interlopers”); *id.* at 129 (“when the largely Western Zionists wrest Palestine from its Arab inhabitants”); *id.* at 170 (“merciless Israeli siege”); *id.* at 186 (“seeds of Zionism shipped from the West”); *id.* at 201 (“Israel’s sledgehammer tactics”); *id.* at 243 (“Israel . . . returned to a policy of brute force employed for decades against the enemies

By ignoring basic facts and by omitting the background for Israel's incursions inside Lebanon, Mackey accuses "[t]he Jewish nation of Israel . . . in the dock of international justice."³⁹ The book hardly expresses compassion for the hurt, fatalities, and damage to the Israeli society. Mackey scarcely mentions those facts at all. For instance, although she indicates the number of rockets that Hezbollah fired into the northern Galilee in 1996, Mackey forgets to mention Israel's civilian casualties and damages.⁴⁰ The author also overlooks more than thirty Israeli civilians murdered by terrorists who originated from Lebanon, an assault that led to Litany Operation in 1978.⁴¹ Nor does she indicate the endless terrorist activities before the 1982 Israeli invasion to Lebanon.⁴² Mackey's hostile approach to Israel is tainted with bias and derived from a political point of view.⁴³ Therefore, it seems difficult to attribute full credibility to the book's background of the Israel-Arab conflict, and consequently sheds a different light on the derived conclusions.

of the Jewish state"). On the other hand, Palestinians, who perpetrated terrorist activities before the Israeli occupation of 1967, are called "freedom fighter[s]." *Id.* at 88. The reader also cannot understand where is exactly the "Palestine" that is the subject of those activities; either it consists solely of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, or it also includes Israel *Id.* at 87, 89-90.

³⁹ ALAN DERSHOWITZ, *THE CASE FOR ISRAEL 1* (2003).

⁴⁰ MACKAY, *supra* note 1, at 178. *Contra* SACHAR, *supra* note 26, at 1011 ("salvos of homemade 'Qassem' rockets wounded thirty-six civilians in Israel's frontier communities").

⁴¹ MACKAY, *supra* note 1, at 169, 174. *Contra* SACHAR, *supra* note 26, at 899; BERNARD REICH, *A BRIEF HISTORY OF ISRAEL 123* (Checkmark 2008) (2005).

⁴² MACKAY, *supra* note 1, at 169. *Contra* SACHAR, *supra* note 26, at 899 ("[t]he guerrillas in turn lashed back with a devastating rocket barrage against Naharia . . . and its surroundings"); *id.* at 902 ("'Operation Peace for the Galilee' . . . thereby alleviating the danger of guerrilla violence against Israel's northern communities"); REICH, *supra* note 41, at 142.

⁴³ See Interview by Jonathan Mok with Sandra Mackey (June 26, 2008), <http://globalcomment.com/2008/the-trouble-in-lebanon-interview-with-sandra-mackey>. Mackey said:

[H]ow much American policy is driven by the needs and desires of Israel. A powerful segment of the Israeli lobby in American politics is right wing Christians who see the state of Israel as God's Biblical promise to the Jews This theology . . . has nonetheless profoundly influenced American Policy for the entire Arab world since right wing Christians organized themselves into a political machine in the late 1970's.

Id.; see also MACKAY, *supra* note 1, at 194, 264.

Regardless of the language and the attitude, the same weakened argument, as analyzed above, also applies here. Mackey asserts that “Israel plays a central role in the tensions between the Arabs and the West.”⁴⁴ Indeed, the Arab resentment against Israel is a result of Israel’s mere existence as a non-Muslim state inside the Arab sphere of influence.⁴⁵ However, the strife among the clans in Lebanon stands on its own. The conflicts preceded the establishment of the Jewish state, and are independent—most of the time even irrelevant—to Israel’s deeds⁴⁶ or even to its occupation of Lebanese territory.⁴⁷ Mackey herself reiterates that those internal clashes are the main cause of the menace in this tormented country.⁴⁸ Hence, one cannot conclude that Israel should be held responsible for Lebanon’s chaos unless one charges Israel’s “sin” as being a Jewish state in the Arab region, and consequently a source of the Palestinian plight.

Mackey further charges that the American involvement and policy in Lebanon has also contributed to the chaos.⁴⁹ However, the American military has not been deployed there in almost twenty-five years.⁵⁰ Mackey’s accusation is further weakened because of “the confrontation between Islam and the West, which dates back to the Crusades according to Islamic radicals.”⁵¹ Additionally, France’s primary and substantial role in Lebanon was ignored. Although Mackey discusses France’s involvement in Lebanon in the early twentieth century, she ignores France’s role in the last decades.⁵²

Another problem with the book lies in its documentation in general and the lack of precise references in particular. The book has no full and

⁴⁴ MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 264.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 186–87; see YAKOBSON & RUBINSTEIN, *supra* note 21, at 64–79.

⁴⁶ MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 36 (the civil strife of 1841–1861), 53 (the crisis of 1932), 160 (clashes in 1919), 173 (struggle inside the Shia), 181 (“The centuries-old tensions pitting the orthodox against the dissenters of Islam . . .”).

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 237, 240, 245.

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 154, 181.

⁴⁹ Mackey contends that the American policy in Lebanon intends, among other reasons, to “protect the Zionist dream.” *Id.* at 11, 43, 186, 189.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 198.

⁵¹ *Id.* at 220.

⁵² *E.g.*, Daniel Ben Simon, *Lebanon Policy / France's Lost Honor*, HAARETZ.COM, Dec. 31, 2007, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/939879.html>; Nadia Abou el-Magd, *Kouchner Leaves Lebanon Without Breakthroughs, Says He Will Return*, INT’L HERALD TRIB., July 29, 2007, available at <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/07/29/africa/ME-GEN-Lebanon-France.php>.

detailed list of sources referred to in the text.⁵³ Thus, it prevents the ability to check the sources and to get an in-depth understanding of the subject. Furthermore, a glance at the selected bibliography reveals a very selective one indeed,⁵⁴ not to mention these are secondary sources. This kind of documentation weakens the author's factual basis⁵⁵ and inevitably raises doubts about the author's ability to present an impartial and accurate description of the subjects.

The problematic nature is further exacerbated by comparing Mackey's book to her previous one.⁵⁶ Browsing the earlier book reveals that sentences and paragraphs have been repeated in Mackey's new book.⁵⁷ Perhaps, one can contend that Mackey's primary premise—Lebanon as “a case study of the Arab world”⁵⁸—changes from one book (or version) to the other. Nevertheless, given the weakness of this mere premise, the outcome becomes bothersome.

IV. Conclusion

In her afterword, Mackey contends that “[i]f East and West are to survive and prosper in a world in which they can no longer remain separated . . . then understanding must come from both sides. This book has been an attempt to begin that process in the West.”⁵⁹ Indeed, the book is a good introduction to the complexity of Lebanon. Thus, I recommend it for U.S. military members, especially those in the high echelon, so they can understand the hazards that lie in a possible future intervention in Lebanon. However, this recommendation comes with a caveat. Mackey places the mirror in front of Western societies,⁶⁰ instead of first and foremost in front of the Lebanese society and the Arab countries. She also blames Israel as one of the main culprits for the

⁵³ MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 4.

⁵⁴ There is only one Israeli author in the bibliography list. *Id.* at 269–71 (listing Itamar Rabinovich as the only Israeli author).

⁵⁵ E.g., the Zionist movement and the modern history of the Jewish state. *See supra* note 35 and accompanying text.

⁵⁶ Also reprinted, and originally published in 1989 under the title *Lebanon: Death of a Nation*. MACKEY, *supra* note 14, at vii.

⁵⁷ Compare *id.* at 142–43 with MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 90; MACKEY, *supra* note 14, at 154, 156 with MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 103.

⁵⁸ MACKEY, *supra* note 1, at 3.

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 255–56.

⁶⁰ To be precise, the “thinkers” among Western societies, as Mackey divides the world. *Id.* at 265.

turmoil in Lebanon. Thus, the “nonspecialist reader”⁶¹ will receive an inaccurate picture of the reality. Consequently and unfortunately, Mackey misses an important target and does not enhance the understanding of the issues at hand.

This scratched mirror should serve both sides to mutually enrich themselves, to gain a realistic picture of their weakness and wickedness, and to appraise their merits and demerits. But in crux, this mirror should be used as a warning sign toward the looming future.

⁶¹ *Id.* at 3.