

overwhelming and seemingly chronic problems. The second response has been a “flight” into hyper-commercialized existence, where the woes of the present and uncertainties of the future are drowned out in a kitsch reproduction that romanticizes bygone eras without engaging that history in a meaningful and honest dialogue. The last and most promising reaction has been new forms of collective action that range from new urban planning and environmental politics to the establishment of artistic neighborhoods. These seemingly innocuous movements in fact have the capacity to transcend painfully divisive memories by creating new spaces for inter-communal action and existence at the same time that they draw on elements of the past. By focusing, for example, on the fact that quarries are devastating the Lebanese (and not Christian or Muslim, rich or poor) environment, “green” organizations create structures and mechanisms for the creation of a civil society in Lebanon and for mobilizing citizens to act outside the rubric of the “state” and the violent “street.” Ultimately, Khalaf argues that it is this new type of civil society that holds the potential to create a new Lebanon that draws on the richness of multi-cultural society even as it transcends parochial communal boundaries. In that sense, Lebanon would stand in clear juxtaposition to a Middle East descending in its totality into the morass of tribalism.

This whirlwind of a book gathers between its pages a most cogent discussion of the pitfalls and promises of Lebanon as a metaphor for new civil society. Its reliance on some older sources and its reintroduction of some ideas discussed elsewhere does not in the least detract from its breadth and depth. For that reason, this book should be read by those seeking to learn more not only about Lebanon but also about the Middle East and communal violence in general.

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HILAL KHASHAN, *Arabs at the Crossroads: Political Identity and Nationalism* (Tampa: University Press of Florida, 2000). Pp. 200. \$59.95 cloth.

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Hilal Khashan’s book is a sweeping indictment of the myriad Arab failures since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of the modern Arab state system. It is a story of overwhelming Arab failures at all levels: political, military, developmental, intellectual, cultural, and social. Common to these failures, however, is a basic foundational dislocation—one that has doomed everything Arab. It is the crisis of identity and legitimacy bedeviling Arab society and politics. This crisis is not without cause, however. It is rooted in the decline of traditional forms of political legitimacy and the concomitant failure to replace them with modern ideas, attitudes, and institutions. Consequently, Khashan contends, “Arabs” suffer from “a severe identity crisis” (p. 1), and the “Arab mind” is utterly confused. Moreover, it is this crisis of identity, and its socio-political ramifications, that explain the failure of the “Arabs” in the aforementioned spheres. In fact, and on Khashan’s reading, everything that transpires in the Arab world is either caused by the “Arab mind” or has a direct impact on it, but only to confuse it even more.

Khashan is not alone in deploying political culture to analyze Arab politics. Nor is he the first to make a connection between the collapse of traditional structures of political authority and the crisis of political identity. However, he employs a rather essentialist and reductionist variant of this analysis, tracing all failures to a common crisis of identity and a dislocated “Arab mind.” Under Khashan’s scrutiny, “Arabs” emerge as a monolithic herd, unable to make

sense of their place in the modern world or transcend their tribal, sectarian, clannish, and regional loyalties. For example, the poor performance of Arab armies is related to the tribal nature of Arab social and political organization (p. 49). And the lack of enthusiasm by Arab regimes to go to war in defense of Palestine should not surprise us, because whereas Mecca is a locus of attention for all Muslim Arabs, Palestine concerns only its local Arab inhabitants (p. 50). This dissonance in personal and regional loyalties explains the loss of Palestine to Zionists, as well as the inability of most Arabs to offer anything more than solidarity to the Palestinian cause. Absent from this unconvincing political-culture explanation is a secular analysis of the dynamics of inter-Arab rivalry, of the disparity in military preparedness between the two sides, and, more important, the impact of British policies on the Palestinian political leadership during the inter-war period. Moreover, Khashan's thesis fails to account for the role played by the Palestinian cause in shaping an Arab state system permeable to trans-regional political and ideological currents, especially in the 1950s and 1960s.

The crisis of identity and the "Arab mind" is also responsible for the failure of post-war developmental projects in the Arab world. After all, the "restless Arab character" (p. 83) is unprepared to deal with the exigencies of economic development, and the lack of a vibrant civil society is in part blamed on the lack of discipline among Arabs and their inability to understand laws and respect them (p. 84). The list does not end here, however. Khashan contends that radical Islamists can successfully recruit members into their brand of militant Islam because the "Arab-Islamic mind" is a "unionist" one (p. 118) and hence easily tapped into by these groups. But is it not more convincing to explain these dynamics in terms of political-economic and sociological variables than by using the reductionist variables of identity and the "Arab mind"? Similarly, though in a different context, does the personal animosity between Hafiz al-Asad and Saddam Hussein best explain Syria's alliance with Iran from 1980 until 1988 (p. 96)? Why invoke idiosyncratic variables when defensive realism provides a more coherent geo-political explanation of this alliance choice?

I do not want to suggest that Khashan fails to offer a good analysis of many of the problems and challenges facing contemporary Arab societies. This he does, and much of his book reads like a straightforward modern political history of the Arab region. But the methodological choices he has made are unconvincing and misleading. The problem with this kind of residual analysis is that it tends to privilege political culture as an explanatory variable over much more convincing, and consistent, explanatory variables, such as the process of state formation, neo-patrimonial regime survival and state building strategies, neo-colonialism, and the dynamics of late and penetrated capitalist development. Moreover, Khashan does not engage in a cross-regional comparative analysis of the many failures he catalogues to ascertain whether these are strictly *Arab* failures or the socio-economic and political consequences of state formation under the pressures of late development and neo-colonialism common to many parts of the so-called developing world.

No region requires a more urgent and critical examination of its past failures and present challenges than the Arab world. But to reduce the causes of these failures and challenges to a crisis of identity and to a "disoriented and politically indecisive" (p. 1) "Arab mind" offers very little insight, both methodologically and empirically, into their true origins and the means to negotiate their peaceful resolution. A genealogy of past failures and present challenges plaguing Arab societies deserves greater methodological self-consciousness and rigor than that exercised in *Arabs at the Crossroads*.