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Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon

Ward Vloeberghs [a]
[a] Ecole de Gouvernance et d'Economie de Rabat, Morocco
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BOOK REVIEW

Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon
Lucia Volk
Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 2010, 250 pp.

As the Syrian crisis shows, sectarianism—that is, political conflict based on confessional identity—remains a tricky concept for analysts of the Levant. Many social scientists see sectarian solidarities as a negative force that must be resisted by forging alternative identities. Lucia Volk, a US-based anthropologist, has studied this phenomenon indirectly, by analysing Lebanese public memorials. Based on two decades of engagement with Lebanon, hers is an intelligent dissertation that rides on two themes: first, politics of memory in the Middle East; and second, politics through public art in the Arab world. Volk intends her contribution as an 'ethnography of Lebanese public culture and political authority' (p. 6). Her monograph confirms Lebanon's relevance in memory studies and political anthropology.

Volk discusses how martyrdom creates meaning that is religiously and politically relevant. In doing so, she objects to a sectarian prism. She criticises 'deterministic kinship ideology' (p. 22) and convincingly argues instead that Lebanese memorials often express shared experiences of sacrifice across all communities and thereby generate national feelings that trump sectarian strategies.

Volk shows that it is not the magnitude of tragedy that defines subsequent commemoration. Rather, commemorative processes follow laws of intentional selection, hence the politics of memory. Crucially, sites of public memory also produce practices of Muslim–Christian parity and transconfessional solidarity.

Volk maintains (p. 8) that elites sponsor memorials and cemeteries hoping to win legitimacy by championing a unifying idea in a 'fragmented' country. By sculpting bodies, carving texts and posting banners, Lebanese politicians use public art to create national images. The making of memorials becomes a way for elites to publicly exercise power.

Historically, this study starts interestingly with resistance in Ottoman and WWI Lebanon but the book mostly deals with independent Lebanon (after 1943) and post-war Lebanon (after 1990). Geographically, Volk focuses on Beirut and South Lebanon (Beqata and Qana) covering Maronite, Druze, Shia and Sunni memorials, thus dealing with all major 'ethno-religious communities' except for the Greek orthodox.

Although, inevitably, one may question these choices (the North and the Beqaa are ignored; can Qana and Beqata be put on equal footing with Beirut?; what about ordinary burial sites?), Volk's systematic juxtaposition of memorials of different communities in four loosely chronological chapters (1917–1957; 1958–1995; 1996–2003; and 2004–2006) allows for a solid set-up that underlines the main

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thesis—that in spite of confessional diversity there is above all cross-confessional solidarity and that shared sacrifice generates a ‘quasi-nationalism’ (p. 189).

Yet, perhaps to strengthen the central argument, Volk somewhat overstates these transconfessional dynamics (pp. 191–199). Thereby, she overlooks the fact that these same elites have also sponsored sites as ways to emphasise sectarian identities. Memorials work exactly because they are easy to manipulate into political launching platforms. Such platforms are relevant only because they are flexible, evolve with the political climate and allow elites to recompose alliances. Two examples illustrate how time and context influence the discourse a memorial conveys.

Firstly, the tomb of Hariri (known as *darīh*) was indeed briefly a symbol of national unity. However, it soon became caught up in a political struggle that triggered redevelopment of the grave and turned it into a propagandistic forum for 14 March politicians. Worse, perhaps, as Christian candles from the early days disappeared and markedly Sunni elements (Quranic verses, prayer beads, amplified recitations) were introduced, the Hariri gravesite substituted its cross-confessional appeal by a distinctively Sunni identity. Volk admits (p. 172) that Hariri’s grave had ‘sectarian markers’ and that memorials often function only ‘temporarily’ (p. 199), but more could be said about the pragmatic dimensions in the production of commemorative spaces.

Secondly, the Lebanese army demonstrates how the same actor can spark feelings of national belonging at one point (Nahr al-Bared campaign, 2007) and sectarian antagonism afterwards (e.g. following the killing of a Sunni cleric in Akkar in May 2012), or vice versa.

Volk acknowledges that ‘there is currently no unifying commemorative narrative of shared sacrifice that binds’ Lebanese communities (p. 184). She explains (p. 198) how the power centre has shifted: in twenty-first-century Lebanon, the powerbrokers are Shiites and Sunnis, with their respective Maronite allies. In this respect, the symbolic date (7 May) and damaging political impact of Aoun’s return from exile in 2005 deserved more attention (p. 162). So does the work of Maasri (2009) on political posters.

To conclude, however, the book’s major contributions greatly outnumber its minor shortcomings. Volk’s argument is relevant, interesting and worthy of praise and follow-up: thinking about Lebanese society outside confessional boxes is tragically relevant in times of sectarian warfare in Syria and beyond.

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