

Liban-Syrie intimes étrangers: Un siècle d'interactions sociopolitiques, by Elizabeth Picard. Paris: Sindbad Actes Sud, 2016. 396 pages. 26 euros.

Reviewed by Clement M. Henry

Domestic politics in Arab countries are so entangled with those of their Arab neighbors that the Arab world seems, however disunited, to be exceptionally integrated. But Elizabeth Picard argues that the *intimes étrangers* (intimate strangers) of Lebanon and Syria do not so much illustrate some Arab exceptionalism as transcend it and resemble other national couples such as East and West Germany before 1990, or Taiwan and Mainland China since the 1970s. Other Arab couples did not quite qualify as comparators in her eyes. Picard views the two Yemens as functionally too “distant” from the nation-state model, and the Jordan-Palestine couple to be inconceivable without Israel (pp. 14-15). Her couple is defined by its French rather than Ottoman origins. Ever since the founding of Greater Lebanon in 1920, followed by those of five other states to comprise the French Mandate of Syria in 1923, Lebanon and Syria contest and complement incomplete processes of national identity formation. It was perhaps out of frustration witnessing Beirut’s “insoluble debates” that Picard elected to rethink Lebanon in light of Syria’s trajectory (p. 10).

Her book is an ambitious analytic history, divided into three processes, those of separation (1920-1950), confrontation (1950-2005), and “distinction” (2005-), and seven themes focused on “critical conjunctures,” starting with the uncertain founding of the two putative nation-states under French strategies of divide and rule. The other themes explore the cultural and political logics of “one single people in two states,” as she recalls President Hafez al-Assad’s summary of the situation; their political economy of complementarities, rivalries, and alignments; nation building and sovereignty during the Cold War; tutelage and predation in Syrian occupied Lebanon from 1991 to 2005; Lebanese “revolution” and Syrian

contestation; and finally, since 2011, the question of whether the two states are becoming a common battlefield.

Picard, an emerita research director of France's National Center of Scientific Research, has studied Lebanon for over three decades and has a rich appreciation of the "single people in two states." She has concise descriptions of numerous notable families straddling the two political and economic systems and shows how even during the Mandate period the interests of the ultra-liberal bankers and traders of Beirut differed from those of the industrialists mainly based in Aleppo and Damascus. In the period after 1950, when the two countries terminated the Mandate's economic union, many Syrian entrepreneurs found their way to Beirut. Some preserved useful informal connections through the period of state socialism in Syria, and some returned after 1990 to guide Syria's partial neo-liberal reforms. "Invisible" financial circuits reappeared in the open after 2003 with the opening of privately owned banks in Syria (pp. 244ff.).

This book employs an arsenal of social science concepts from Gramsci to Charles Tilly to delineate the odd couple's history. Reference to Gramsci's historic bloc in Lebanon, for instance, allows Picard to inject class interests into stereotypical confessionalism and sectarian conflict. As for Tilly's nation building, cross national militias seem to work at cross purposes. She reverses Carl von Clausewitz' dictum about war to suggest that in Lebanon politics became war by other means, once Syria officially withdrew its military forces in 2005. Indeed, the hope that Lebanon might recover its form of democracy was quickly dashed as the Lebanese politicians, who had all at one time or another allied with Damascus, simply reinforced their authoritarian practices (p. 291). Predatory transnational networks survived, slightly rearranged after a couple of suicides or murders of top Syrian leaders as well as the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. Picard resorts to "path dependence" to explain the different but equally unsuccessful attempts to democratize the respective regimes in the 2000s.

Picard highlights the couple's mutual dependence in many ways. Not only did predominantly Lebanese clienteles need Syrian protectors. The Assads also used Lebanon's confessional and other divisions to cement and legitimate their own rule and to extract resources for their security networks. Syrian dependence reached new extremes after the uprising in the Arab Spring of 2011. The Lebanese Hezbollah subsequently reinforced the embattled Syrian army. Two very weakened – but not “failed” (pp. 307-308) -- states no longer control their frontiers, and parts of their territory have become a common battleground, resulting in more refugees importing their local violence and racketeering with them (p. 352).

As for revising national borders, Picard reminds the reader that Sykes-Picot traced zones of economic influence, not political frontiers, between the British and French; indeed the line immediately shifted with the British military presence in 1918 to exclude Mosul from the French mandate. Picard makes no predictions but argues that any division between a secular Syrian regime based in Latakia and a Sunni one in Damascus is a non-starter. Indeed the real question is not whether there be one, two, or a multitude of states in what is now mapped as Syria and Lebanon. The question “is rather to determine the conditions for effective *political exchange* in these countries” (p. 366). Here she cites Douglass North, “Institutions and a Transaction-Cost Theory of Exchange,” but then goes on to urge a “refounding of political community ‘from below’” (p. 367) while also pointing to the many dedicated civil servants and politicians who have sustained social services in both countries and continue to do so under dire circumstances.

Clement M. Henry
Emeritus Professor of Government and Middle East Studies
The University of Texas at Austin