

## Book Review

### The Lebanon that Once Existed

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Franck Salameh

Charles Corm: An Intellectual Biography of  
a Twentieth-Century Lebanese "Young Phoenician"

Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015, 257 pp.

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The Lebanese intellectual and journalist Hanin Ghaddar, who was once the managing editor of the Lebanese news magazine *Now Lebanon*, which gave voice to liberal secular and civic Lebanese citizens and who is now living outside Lebanon, was recently sentenced in absentia by a Lebanese military court for defaming the Lebanese Army. Ghaddar is also a vehement critic of the role played by Hezbollah within the Lebanese Shi'ite community both within Lebanon and the Middle East as a whole. In an article she wrote for the *Wall Street Journal* she mourned the lack of freedom of speech that once existed in Lebanon and entitled her article: "Hezbollah Has Destroyed the Lebanon *I Once Knew*".<sup>1</sup>

This lack of freedom of speech in today's Lebanon and the yearning for the Lebanon that existed in the past is a good point of departure to discuss Franck Salameh's biography of Charles Corm. Corm was a man of many parts: an intellectual, a poet, a painter, and a gifted businessman who was an advocate of the idea of a Phoenician Lebanon that claims that the origin of the Lebanese people is not Arab but rather Phoenician. The Phoenicians, the advocates of this idea claim, were "Shrewd merchants, talented engineers, skilled ship builders, intrepid

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<sup>1</sup> Hanin Ghaddar "Hezbollah Has Destroyed the Lebanon I Once Knew", *Wall Street Journal*, January 28, 2018, [www.wsj.com/articles/hezbollah-has-destroyed-the-lebanon-i-once-knew-1517175520](http://www.wsj.com/articles/hezbollah-has-destroyed-the-lebanon-i-once-knew-1517175520) (Accessed October 15, 2018). My italics. Due to international pressure, the Lebanese Army canceled its charges against Ghaddar.

mariners, elegant intermediaries, and inspired artisans and poets” (p. 9); and, according to Salameh’s biography, some of these characteristics can undoubtedly be attributed to Charles Corm.

This is not an ordinary biography that starts with the birth of a person and ends with his death, since in every chapter Salameh reveals a different feature of Corm. Sometimes it is Corm the poet and sometimes it is Corm the entrepreneur, but it is always Corm the charmer, the open-minded humanist – the person of debate and ideas. In everything he did, Corm represented the Lebanon he aspired to: a country which could be a bridge between East and West and which embraced various identities. Corm’s Lebanon was a place of debate, of the exchange of opinions and the acceptance of the other. Indeed, Corm’s circle of friends included Muslim and Christian, Arabs and Jews.

In this book, Salameh compares and contrasts the flexibility of Corm’s nationalist ideas and the rigidity of Arab nationalism exemplified by the Arab nationalism of Michel Aflaq and Sati al-Husri who, for example, did not accept identities other than the Arab identity which they wished to enforce upon the people of the region. Since Corm’s ideas meant diversity and flexibility, Arab identity, according to him, was just one of the many other identities in Lebanon and the region. Instead of a homogenous Arab Middle East, Corm believed that the region, especially Lebanon, should be seen as being a mosaic made up of many cultures and identities. It appears that Salameh was the right person to write such a biography, as his academic work concentrates on the various identities in the Levant and the diversity and the heterogenic nature of this region.<sup>2</sup>

It is difficult to not become absorbed in both this book and the very soul of Charles Corm and I could not help but feel that it is a book that mourns the Lebanon that once existed but which has changed. In the current reality of a Lebanon in which freedom of speech and the exchange of opinions is in danger, one can only

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<sup>2</sup> See for example: Franck Salameh, *Language, Memory, and Identity in the Middle East: The Case for Lebanon* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010); Franck Salameh, *The Other Middle East: An Anthology of Modern Levantine Literature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

wonder what is left of Charles Corm's ideas in Lebanon. Unfortunately, it appears that if one is looking for remnants of Corm's Lebanese ideas, he will find them *outside* Lebanon, among the Lebanese diaspora. To sum up, this book, which is written with passion and which is frequently poetic, not only makes a significant contribution to the understanding of Lebanese history; it, more importantly, helps us understand the history and the nature of the Middle East.

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