

Handout 14: Historiography (Farid El-Khazen and Fawwaz Trabulsi)

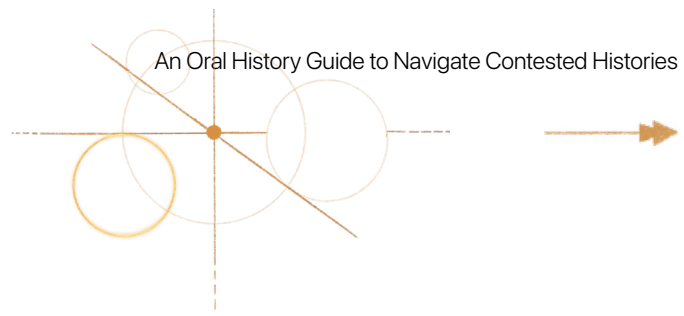
Session: *Historiography*

Historiography through Book Reviews Farid El-Khazen and Fawwaz Trabulsi

Guiding Questions for Group Presentations

1. Describe in general the purpose of each book. How does the reviewer (Irani in El-Khazen's case and Haugbolle in Trabulsi's case) describe the book in relation to other books on the same topic?
2. What historical content does the book cover according to the reviewer?
3. According to each reviewer (Irani and Haugbolle), what is the main argument that El-Khazen OR Trabulsi presents as related to the history of the war? What kind of perspective does El-Khazen present on the war? What about Trabulsi?
4. In one sentence, how would you summarize each historian's explanation of the causes of the war? How does this reflect multiperspectivity?
5. What do you think the reviewer's (Irani, Haugbolle) view on the war is? Do they agree with the view presented by the historian they reviewed?
6. What additional information in these book reviews caught your attention that you would like to share with the group?





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1. George Emile Irani¹ reviews: **Farid El-Khazen, *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon, 1967-1976***. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

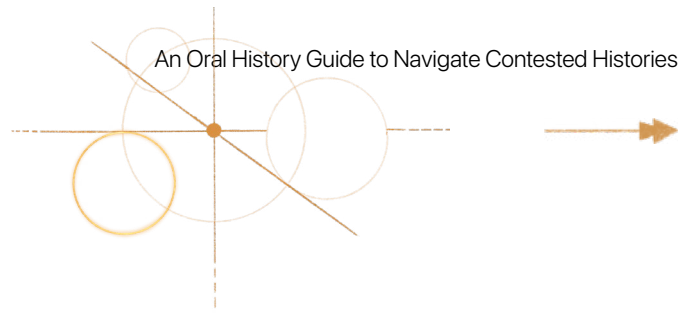
The Lebanese civil war, which lasted more than 15 years, was a harbinger of the other ethnic and ethno-religious conflicts that marred the second half of the 20th century. There are **several interpretations of the origins and the causes of the Lebanese war**. *One view* holds that this war stemmed from regional and global conflicts. In the words of Lebanon's premier publicist, Ghassan Tueini, the conflict there was "**la guerre des autres**" (the others' war). Lebanon was used as a battlefield for the ongoing clashes in the Middle East and the superpower rivalries resulting from the Cold War. *Another interpretation*, provided mostly from the leftist and Marxist perspective, places the **blame solely on the Lebanese** and mainly on the Sunni-Maronite communities.

El-Khazen's book is the most comprehensive and scholarly assessment of the years leading up to the civil war in Lebanon and the "breakdown" of the Lebanese republic. There are five reasons why the author decided to end his study in 1976. First, the military confrontations in 1975-76 were the culmination of political and military conflicts which had begun in the late 1960s. Second, the 1975-76 military confrontations were more spontaneous than the organized pitched battles of the 1970s and 1980s. Third, after 1976 Syria became embroiled in the Lebanese quagmire, and the civil war became a regional war by proxy. Fourth, after 1976, according to Khazen, the Lebanese political scene totally changed. A major catalyst of this change was the assassination of Kamal Jumblatt, Lebanon's foremost leader of the Leftist-Muslim coalition and staunch ally of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Last but not least, the post-1982 military scene in Lebanon was totally altered by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon led by (Israeli General) Ariel Sharon.

El-Khazen situates his study in a comparative perspective. He maintains that the breakdown of the state in Lebanon is **due to specific internal and external factors**. The author also contends that pre-war confessional system in Lebanon, despite its shortcomings, was able to function relatively well. The author raises the very important point that Lebanon's domestic political and socio-economic problems, both before and after 1975, were not too different from those affecting other developing countries. El-Khazen writes: "Where Lebanon's problems do differ is in the nature and scope of externally-generated problems originating mainly from its regional order - specifically the Arab state system and post-1967 PLO" (p. 10). **El-Khazen's basic argument** is that the confessional system in Lebanon is a guarantee and a recognition of diversity and dissent, which are two key prerequisites for establishing a democratic system. The fundamental problem, though, is that the Lebanese polity could not withstand the pressures stemming from the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict, inter-Arab rivalries, PLO meddling in internal Lebanese politics, and constant Israeli pressure on a weak state with a fragmented society.

¹ "The Lebanese War Revisited: The Long Road from Breakup to Reconciliation: Review Article." *Middle East Journal*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2001, pp. 320-22. [JSTOR](#)





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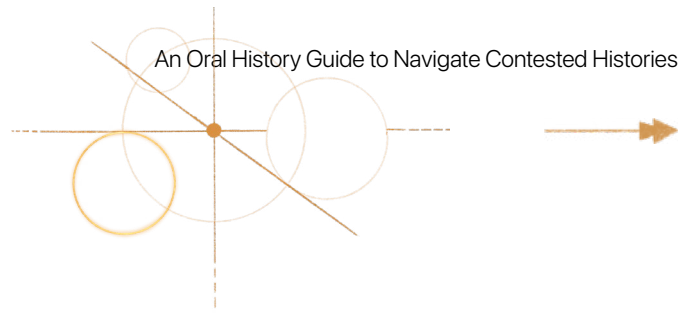
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El-Khazen's most revealing chapters are those dealing with the **Palestinian presence in Lebanon** and PLO machinations. He posits that Yasir Arafat's *raison de revolution* clashed with the Lebanese government's *raison d'état*. The two could not co-exist. Lebanon was pushed to carry a heavier burden than its communal and confessional system could handle. The author observes that unlike other Arab states, which were essentially autocratic and repressive (e.g., the Ba'th regimes in Iraq and Syria), Lebanon enjoyed a somewhat open and free society. This was Lebanon's Achilles' heel.

In writing about the Cairo Agreement between Lebanon and the PLO (1969) - which initiated the civil war in Lebanon - El-Khazen states that the agreement "was an unusual document having no precedent in the annals of bilateral accords. It was neither an agreement between two enemy forces, nor an unambiguous agreement of co-operation between two friendly parties. Nor was it an agreement between two states ... [The Cairo Agreement] became largely of symbolic significance: a date of reference to indicate the first major PLO political and military breakthrough in Lebanon" (p. 167).

At the end of his book, El-Khazen states that Lebanon and the PLO were mirror images of one another. The ruling elite in Lebanon (especially those from the Sunni community), who were regarded as "sectarian" and "isolationist" by the radical factions of the PLO, perceived Arafat's troops as a convenient ally to end Maronite hegemony. On the other hand, the Leftist and Marxist groups in Lebanon found in the PLO-especially its radical factions-a sympathetic ally. El-Khazen concludes that "what Lebanon offered the PLO, particularly in terms of political and ideological diversity, would not have been found in other Arab countries" (p. 376).





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2. Sune Haugbolle² reviews Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A Modern History of Lebanon* London: Pluto Press, 2007.

There is more need than ever to understand the history of Lebanon, its precarious political system, and its perilous role in regional and international affairs, particularly since its contemporary history, as Fawwaz Traboulsi writes in *A Modern History of Lebanon*. Traboulsi's book is the first history to cover the whole period from the Ottoman incursion in 1523 to the end of the civil war in 1990. Kamal Salibi's *Modern History of Lebanon* (published in 1965 and reprinted by Caravan Books in 1977) and his later book *A House of Many Mansions* (I. B. Tauris, 1993) have long been the standard references. While Salibi provides a historical account of power-sharing between Lebanon's sects, he sheds little light on the class and social dimensions of Lebanon's history.

Traboulsi's analysis in *A Modern History of Lebanon* is based on political economy and elements of cultural and social history and thus highlights the areas that Salibi neglects. Traboulsi's book builds on the rich body of recent research as well as his own experience. Political economy is not alien to Traboulsi. His early Marxist-inspired writings from his time as a political activist with the Lebanese and Arab left and as a founding member of the Organization for Communist Action in Lebanon; his translations into Arabic of thinkers like Antonio Gramsci, Karl Marx, Edward Said, and Fredric Jameson; and his later works of critical sociology and cultural history have made him a well-known and respected Arab public intellectual and critical thinker.

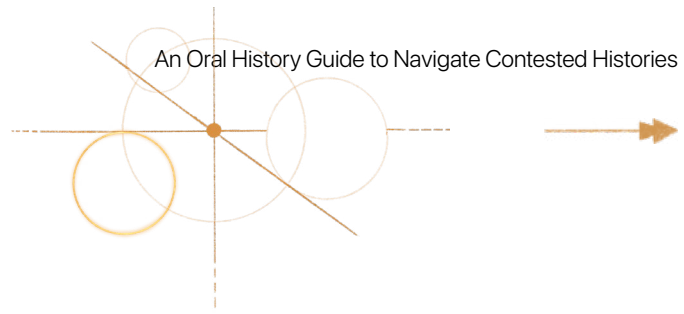
In his analysis of pre-war Lebanon, Traboulsi highlights the *inability of the political social system to reflect the changing social realities as a main reason for the radicalization of the 1968-75 period*. Social mobility, rapid urbanization, failed educational models, and *generally half-cooked reforms during the Shihab era* triggered a politicization of the middle and lower-middle classes. The book offers great insight into the social dimension of this radicalization in the leftist milieu [...] when the Progressive Socialist Party and the Phalange Party, which had remained united during Shihab's presidency, split over the Palestinian issue. This effectively divided the middle classes and set the country on the course to war (155).

By pointing to the importance of this schism, Traboulsi is in line with one of Farid al-Khazen's main conclusions in *The Breakdown of the State in Pre-War Lebanon* (Harvard University Press, 2000).

At the same time, Traboulsi's discussion also contrasts with al-Khazen in that it places less emphasis on the Palestine Liberation Organization as a destabilizing factor. *Traboulsi suggests that the system itself was sufficiently unstable even without outside pressure*. The oligarchic tendencies of the political system and the pre-war economy relegated the country to the role of regional middleman and left it vulnerable to the whims of the market.

2 Haugbolle, Sune. *The Arab Studies Journal*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2007, pp. 143-47. [JSTOR](#)





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The third part of the book is dedicated to the civil war and begins with a discussion of Kamal Jumblatt's struggle for social and political reforms through arms (*al-islam bi silah*). Traboulsi quotes Jumblatt asking whether "the adventure [was] worth the try" (187). Worth the try or not, the adventure failed. This failure was partly because the prospect of economic reforms as a tradeoff for secular reforms did not sway the bourgeoisie (203), and partly because the involved parties calculated a short and sweet "adventure" rather than a prolonged conflict. The adventure did not just fail, it backfired and led to the involvement of Syria in 1976, which regionalized the war and turned it into a stage for Syrian-Palestinian-Israeli confrontations.

At the same time, the prolonged conflict entrenched sectarian militias in the social and political fabric of the country. The discussion of the war economy during the era of entrenched militia rule after 1983 is one of the highlights of Traboulsi's book. Here, political economy truly comes to light, *illuminating the extent to which militia leaders cooperated in holding companies, extrapolating funds for their militias, while at the same time representing their respective "masses" in strictly sectarian terms*. The cynical nature of this "war system" and its parasitic grip on the state institutions could not have been described more clearly or in a more timely manner, as former militia barons like Walid Jumblatt, Nabih Berri, and Samir Ja'ja' today clamor for "accountability" and "justice" in the standoff over the Hariri tribunal.

Some may detect a certain nostalgic skew in favor of the National Movement in its early stages. But Traboulsi distributes his critique even-handedly. With regard to the left, he notes that its project for reform degenerated as the National Movement slipped toward Muslim sectarian themes after the death of Jumblatt (214). On most fronts, ideological fervor burned out and was replaced with sheer exploitation, with the exception of the resistance against Israel. The absence of ideology in the latter stages of the war made it difficult for the sectarian militias to mobilize people. Instead, they turned inward against their own groups in the clashes of 1987-1990.

Throughout, Traboulsi provides an unrivaled analysis of the political economy of Lebanon that ties the narratives together in a balanced approach characterized by a commitment to present facts and not to become sidetracked by ideological discussions. The result is a formidable book that will remain a key reference work about Lebanon's history for years to come.

