

‘Citizens of the World... Who Stopped on Every Shore’: Lebanese Phoenicianism as a Diasporic Discourse: Dr. Andrew Arsan Gives Lecture at NDU

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Reported by Stacy Fahrenthold, LERC Research Affiliate

“Nationalism is a Janus-faced thing,” begins Dr. Andrew Arsan, quoting Scottish thinker Tom Nairn, “It looks at once backwards, into a past time of mythical glory, and forwards, to a bold future of glossy achievement.” As a sort of “nostalgic futurism,” patriotic nationalism is of special concern to historians, whose craft is centered on the relationship of the past to the present. In the early days of the twentieth century, Lebanese intellectuals in Beirut, Paris, and Cairo described modern Lebanon's connection to its distant Phoenician past, framing this golden age of mercantile commerce, letters, and pan-Mediterranean culture as a foil against the corruption and maladministration Ottoman Lebanon experienced just prior World War I. This body of ideas had clear political utility; before the war, Phoenicianist intellectuals sought Lebanon's autonomy within the imperial state, and after 1914 they formed a vanguard seeking national independence. Arsan proposes that while Phoenicianism was linked to Lebanese nationalism, it was also larger than politics. Phoenicianism was firstly a cultural movement which allowed Lebanese emigrants to make sense of their own diasporic world. On November 16, Dr. Arsan gave a lecture titled, “‘Citizens of the world...who stopped on every shore’: Reading Lebanese Phoenicianism as a diasporic discourse”, as part of the Lebanese Emigration Research Center's ongoing series. LERC's director, Guita Hourani, presided over the discussion.



Dr. A. Arsan delivers his talk as part of LERC's ongoing Lecture Series (Nov 2011).

The discussion at NDU's Abou Khater Hall marks Dr. Arsan's timely emphasis on writing Lebanese History from a wider, more global perspective, an approach that elucidates the country's ongoing connections to the world around it through the movement of people and ideas. For this talk, Arsan's moment is the decade before World War I, when Lebanese intellectuals in Beirut, Paris, and Cairo invoked the Phoenician past to make sense of their troubled present. In the light of a global fascination with ancient history during the early twentieth century, the image of the Phoenician people as world travelers, cosmopolitan merchants, and advocates of a global Mediterranean culture became an important symbol for Lebanon's diaspora, which then represented up to one quarter of the Lebanese people. Phoenician history gave these emigrants a utopian cultural ideal rooted in notions of a lost-- and importantly, a re-attainable-- "golden age". It proffered an analogy for late Ottoman Lebanon's social predicament, where Ottoman maladministration combined with land hunger and a lack of opportunity to produce mass emigration. In the diaspora, Lebanese intellectuals emphasized their Phoenician cultural patrimony in order to turn this bleak picture into opportunity. Although mass emigration weakened Lebanon, they argued, the emigrants abroad could also serve as a source of strength, sending home not only remittances but new ideas about culture, society, and politics learned from abroad. Phoenicianism, then, gave many of Lebanon's emigrants a sense of culture purpose. The philosophy allowed them to make sense of their lives in the diaspora. It assisted them in maintaining their sense of connection with home.

In Arsan's estimation, regarding Phoenicianism as a singular, utilitarian nationalist ideology obscures the diversity of its origins. Analogizing the distant Phoenician past met the cultural needs of a people coming to grips with questions about diaspora, dispersion, civil society, and multiculturalism. He concludes that "far from simply basking complacently in the glow of past glory, early-twentieth century writers like Ahmed Tabbarah or Khayrallah Khayrallah found in allusions to a common past one means... of coping with movement, considering its costs and seizing upon its seemingly emancipatory potential. They sought, in other words, primarily to talk through diaspora, to make sense of migration." Phoenicianism was a powerful Lebanese multiculturalism in the early twentieth century, one which might serve as an apt template for contemporary debates about political identity and the diaspora's place within it.

Dr. Andrew Arsan is a postdoctoral fellow at Princeton University's Department of Near East Studies. Born in Beirut, he attended schools in Paris and London before obtaining his PhD at the University of Cambridge, UK, where he completed a dissertation on Lebanese emigrants in French West Africa. Aside from a recent article in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*,¹ he is also working on three books on Lebanese social history, including *A People in Movement: A Global History of the Lebanese Diaspora* with Columbia University Press, scheduled for release in 2013.

1 Andrew Kerim Arsan, "Failing to Stem the Tide: Lebanese Migration to French West Africa and the Competing Prerogatives of the Imperial State," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53, no. 3 (2011): 450-478.