

44 LAW PROGRAMS AND PROJECTS AT 4.3 BILLION DOLLARS TO NO AVAIL

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HAGOP HAVATIAN

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SAINTS, TRAITORS, VILLAINS, AND FOOLS WITH TWO AIRPORTS

“...Historical self-deception is a luxury which only societies confident of their unity and solidarity can afford...Divided societies, on the other hand, cannot afford such fanciful indulgence. To gain the degree of solidarity that is needed to maintain viability, their best chance lies in getting to know and understand the full truth of their past, and to accommodate to its realities”.

Kamal Salibi



In a country like ours, names of places and individuals are not mere words but deep expressions of emotions and memories. They become symbols and idols not to be taken lightly. Examining some names in our history would take us to an interesting path, especially when we trace how the egos of these individuals were transformed into legends and fantasies that are treated as historical facts, by which we live, and sometimes die.

In the 17th century, Fakhreddine II, we were told as children, was a “hero and the maker of Lebanon”. It is true that he faced an opposition force (“evil ones”) mainly Al-Saifa of A’akkar, who “collaborated” with the Ottomans and therefore he “reluctantly” killed a few of them and (forcefully) married their daughter. He went into exile to Tuscany “to plan for the liberation of Lebanon”, the school history book says.

In the 18th century, Haidar Al-Shehabi, Fakhreddine’s grandson, won the Ain Dara battle (1711) against Al-Alameddine and ascertained the rule of Al-Shehab. However, history books did not consider him a hero. Perhaps it is now a convenient time for some Lebanese tribes to rediscover him.

In the 19th century, there was Basheer Al-Shihabi II, “a just and powerful leader and another maker of modern Lebanon”. It is true that he rounded the “usual villains” who were “traitors conspiring against him and pierced his nephew’s eyes [not ears], but the man was great”.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, the number of “heroes” and “traitors” grew tremendously. Our children are now “learning”, how “great” or “miserable” Lebanon is because of “them”.

History books, not recognized by our schools, tell us a different story. Fakhreddine II and Bashir II were not the nation’s builders nor did they claim or even pretended to be. Lonely, daring and vain men doing what they know best: crush your opponent, bow to the powerful, bribe your way and survive. Fakhreddine was neither a rebel against the Ottomans nor was he trying to “unite Lebanon”, considering that some of his fiefdoms extended to what is now Syria and Israel. His luck or Fortuna changed when his friend passed away and his enemy became the advisor to the Sultan.

In Tuscany, Fakhreddine was almost a prisoner; perhaps an honorary guest and more accurately a decoy to fool the Turks into believing that a massive sea invasion of Syria (Lebanon) is under preparation, so they do not invade Tuscany first. His money, deposited in a bank called Monte di Pieta, is still unclaimed. His family, mother, sons and daughters suffered throughout their lives and he was killed in Istanbul.

Basheer II had one of his sons tell the Turks that his father is their ally and the other son tell Mohammad Ali that his father is actually fooling the Turks. He had his rivals, Basheer Jumblat and Basheer Qassim II, exiled and/or killed, and like them died in exile, penniless and homeless. Basheer is now remembered for his palace in Beiteddine, which was built for him, and Fakhreddine for the Beirut pines, which perhaps existed before him; at least we can believe that they had good taste.

One question remains: why did Basheer or Fakhreddine become more famous and prominent than Haidar or their opponents like Al-Saifa and many others. The truth is they had stronger alliances, encountered and tapped into major international events, and yes, good Fortuna, up to a point. All this came to mind when a colleague said that she will not fly from Hariri International Airport until its original name Beirut International Airport is restored. Another colleague advised her to wait until René Mouawad Airport in A’akkar is commissioned.

Al-Saifa would be thrilled to hear the news that their beloved A’akkar will have an airport, except they are no more. Lebanon’s fictionalized history will soon have two real airports. There are no saints and no villains, no heroes and no traitors but only lonely and vain men with big egos and innocent, ignorant, or opportunistic men who perpetuate the myths.

The question is, if Lebanon cannot afford historical self-deception, as stated by Kamal Salibi, can it afford two airports?

Let us all enjoy the flight and hope it is safe...

In memory of the late Dr. Kamal Salibi, The Monthly republishes Jawad Adra’s article which was issued in issue number 57 of March-April 2007 and contained excerpts from Dr. Salibi’s writings.

Jawad N. Adra