

The Monthly

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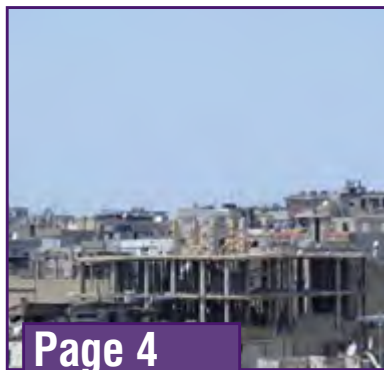
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- THE MONTHLY INTERVIEWS SANDRA DAGHER

CONSTRUCTION IN LEBANON



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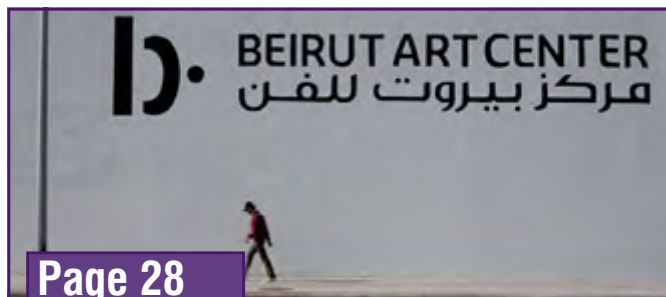
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ZAKI AL ARSOUZI AND ANTOUN SAADEH, WHEN THEY TALK OR CRY



The “conventional wisdom” decreed, during the Turkish-Syrian rapprochement, that the case of Iskenderun commonly known in this part of the world as the “usurped province”, ought not to be discussed. So the two parties, the Ba’ath Party and the SSNP, the former founded by Zaki Al Arsouzi and the latter by Antoun Saadeh, who always campaigned for the case of Iskenderun, remained silent. They even praised the “wisdom” in making a deal with Turkey to spite their local rivals. Suddenly and apparently after being satisfied with its human rights records on the Kurdish question, Turkey declared its concern regarding human rights in Syria. And simultaneously, these two parties started to remember Iskenderun again. Neither party deliberated on the problems of ideologies, strategies and national interest. Is the land more important than the people? How do you deal with a neighbor who declares friendship but has taken a land that you feel is rightly yours? Neither party felt it was high time to launch a critique of their ideas and their conduct since their foundation.

Zaki Al Arsouzi grew up in Sunjunq Iskendeun, during the Ottoman era. He taught in Antioch and Konia and was a director of education in Arsouz as reflected in his name. In the late 1920s, he founded a library by the name “Al Ba’ath Al Arabi” and in 1938, he founded a political movement that he also called “Al Ba’ath Al Arabi.” In 1945, he co-founded with Michel Aflaq and Salaheddine Al Bitar, the Ba’ath Party, which played and is still playing a role in the history of this region. Arsouzi is recognized by the Syrian Ba’ath Party as “the founder” while Aflaq is treated as “a pariah.” Interestingly, Arsouzi demanded of those wishing to become members of the Ba’ath Party “to write or translate a book contributing to the renaissance of the Arab culture.”

On the other hand, Antoun Saadeh stressed the importance of music and painting as well as Palestine and Iskenderun in the makeup of a nation. He also criticized Arsouzi for advocating nationalism based on religion and semitism.

Bluntly speaking, these two men didn’t like each other. Arsouzi ended up in Wadi Qandeel, Latakia, not far from his beloved Iskenderun, which the French annexed to Turkey, and near Samra where a popular TV series, “Al Daiy’ah Day’ah” or “the lost village”, is being filmed. Antoun Saadeh was killed in 1949.

So what?

We end up with two important parties who have miserably failed and defiantly refuse to retire. Neither one wants to share with us their glories or their failures. The SSNP is now more Lebanese than the Phalanges, criticizing discussions of “internal Syrian affairs”, and praising the inauguration of diplomatic relations between Lebanon and Syria with the establishment of two embassies. The Ba’ath Party does not tell us why it has reached its current status in both Iraq and Syria.

More importantly, where is the scale of values of these two parties and what have they lately contributed to art, culture and the wellbeing of their people?

What if?

If Arsouzi and Saadeh meet again, they might perhaps have a friendly talk and share a tear or two pondering not over “a lost village” but over “a lost nation.”

— Jawad N. Adra