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978-1-107-00108-4 - The Politics of National Celebrations in the Arab Middle East

Elie Podeh

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The Politics of National Celebrations in the Arab Middle East

Why do countries celebrate defining national and religious moments or significant events in their history, and how and why do their leaders select certain events for commemoration and not others? This book is the first systematic study of the role of celebrations and public holidays in the Arab Middle East from the fall of the Ottoman Empire to the present. By tracing the history of the modern nation-state through successive generations, the book shows how Arab rulers have used public holidays as a means of establishing their legitimacy and, more broadly, a sense of national identity. Most recently, some states have attempted to nationalize religious festivals in the face of the Islamic revival. With its many illustrations and copious examples from across the region, the book offers an alternative perspective on the history and politics of the Middle East.

Elie Podeh is Professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His publications include *Britain and the Middle East*, co-edited with Zach Levey (2008), *Arab–Jewish Relations from Conflict to Resolution?*, co-edited with Asher Kaufman (2005), *Rethinking Nasserism: Revolution and Historical Memory in Modern Egypt*, co-edited with Onn Winckler (2004), and *The Arab–Israeli Conflict in Israeli History Textbooks, 1948–2000* (2002).

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What is a rite?” asked the little prince. “Those also are actions too often neglected,” said the fox. “They are what make one day different from other days, one hour from other hours. There is a rite, for example, among my hunters. Every Thursday they dance with the village girls. So Thursday is a wonderful day for me! I can take a walk as far as the vineyards. But if the hunters danced at just any time, every day would be like every other day, and I should never have my vacation at all.”

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*

[King] Admetus:

[T]o the citizens and to the whole region of my four cities, I now give orders to raise choruses for these happy events and to fatten the altars of the gods with prayer and the sacrifice of bulls. For now we have taken on a better life than before. I will not deny that I am blessed by fortune.

Euripides, *Alcestis*, line 1154

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Preface

I have always been struck by national events, such as the raising of the flag, the playing of the anthem, military parades, and ceremonies commemorating historical martyrs. Such events often succeed in raising the level of emotionality of the individual, arousing some atavistic feelings of belonging to some greater collectivity and an imagined homeland. My interest in this subject dates back many years, when, as a young officers' cadet, I practiced for several weeks in preparation for participation in a military parade on the occasion of Israel's Independence Day. As I was dutifully fulfilling the orders of my command and enjoying the fact that the routine of my officers' course had dramatically changed, I could not help but wonder about the utility of this ritual. Futile or not, the parade was an ecstatic moment for both participants (myself included) and spectators. And though military parades are no longer held in Israel, Independence Day, like other national holidays, is ceremoniously celebrated. On that day, ordinary Israelis are asked to take part in a range of holiday activities intended to signify and sanctify the existence of the Israeli (particularly Jewish) state. Some do it enthusiastically, some do it out of habit, and some exhibit a noticeable measure of indifference and apathy. To be sure, Israel – as we shall see in this volume – is not unique in defining itself, *inter alia*, through the existence of a national calendar, with commemoration and celebration days.

The way in which the national calendar is composed and affects political and social life has continued to interest me as an academic and observer of the Middle East. Yet the role of holidays in Israel has been thoroughly studied by historians and sociologists. In addition, the fact that in Israeli academia there has always been a separation between Israeli–Jewish and

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Middle Eastern studies (a problem I have dealt with elsewhere) meant that this “territory” has been “excluded” from my “natural” domain – being a scholar of Middle Eastern studies. The combination of these two factors induced me to explore this phenomenon in the Arab world – a subject that suffers, incidentally, from great neglect.

The completion of this book and its publication by Cambridge University Press are a personal celebration. Against the unjustified judgment of some Israeli scholars that my attempt to deal with six Arab case studies is “too broad” and “too ambitious” – thereby precluding me from some much needed funds for the research – I believed that the comprehensiveness of the subject matter is one of its strengths. This thinking, to my joy and relief, was fully embraced by the reviewers of this book. Ultimately, the book deals with only five case studies as a result of an editorial decision. The lesson of this episode, mainly for young aspiring academics, is that one should not succumb to the tyranny of narrow-minded fellow academics.

Upon the completion of this relatively long journey, I would like to thank various institutions and individuals who helped me traverse this project. The Faculty of Humanities and the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, both at the Hebrew University, provided valuable financial support. As this research is based largely on Arab newspapers, the help of Haim Gal, at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel-Aviv University, in collecting the material is highly appreciated. Professor Avi Shlaim of Oxford University provided some important advice in the process of publishing the manuscript. I want to thank Dr. Gabriella Elgenius, from the London School of Economics, for guiding me in my initial steps on the subject of national holidays. Thanks too are due to several colleagues and friends who read various chapters – each in his own expertise: Dr. Yoav Alon, Dr. Oren Barak, Dr. Asher Kaufman, Dr. Omri Nir, Professor Yitzhak Reiter, Dr. Ronen Zeidel, and Dr. Assaf David. At Cambridge University Press, I would like to thank the editor, Marigold Acland, for providing counsel and guidance; and her assistant, Joy Mizan, for closely following the process of publication. I would also like to thank Soniya Ashok and the team at Newgen Publishing and Data Services. Special thanks to my diligent research assistant, Yoni Sheffer, who was helpful throughout the research in collecting material and overcoming the many hurdles I encountered with the Arabic language; and to Merav Ya‘akobi, who helped me in many ways during the preparation of this manuscript. Also,

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I want to thank Lisa Perlman, who keeps polishing my English. Finally, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to my family – my wife, Elianna, and my three kids, Amarelle, Edan, and Eden – who celebrate with me in spite of my decision to chose such an unsocial profession.

Elie Podeh, Ra'anana

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