

00:00 to 00:47

As the title indicates, as I said, the book is titled “Language Memory and Identity in the Middle East; the Case for Lebanon”, and essentially, it deals with the construction of national identity in the modern Middle East, and the use of language and historical memory, and perhaps even the construction of language and historical memory for the purpose of constructing national identities.

00:50 to 3:01

The reason why I began thinking about writing something like this started when I was doing my graduate work at Brandeis University. The theme that I was interested in at that time was “minority peoples in the Levant area, minorities in the Middle East, in the Eastern Mediterranean...” More importantly, I was interested in minority narratives and minority history. But that coincided with 9/11, the beginning of the rush towards “Arabic”, towards wanting to acquire Arabic, and as part of my graduate work I was asked if I was able or willing to teach Arabic, and that is how I fell into teaching Arabic at the time, even though I was being formed to be a historian, a cultural historian; I initially dealt essentially with intellectual history and the history of ideas in the modern Middle East. And eventually I got into teaching Arabic at Brandeis University, teaching what we call “Modern Standard Arabic”, which is not a spoken language; I like to say it is a “vocalized language”; it is a language that people speak out of prepared texts; it is not a language that is spoken spontaneously; it is a “learned language”; it is a language that people acquire at school; and it is nobody’s “natively spoken language” but rather always a “second language.” And so, for that reason, Arabic is a language that is reserved to a minority of people in the Middle East, namely the elites and the educated and literati and writers and so forth... But that is the language that we teach in the academy. .. and that’s the language that we teach when people come to us and say “we want to study Arabic”, that’s the language that is talked about.

03:04 to 04:33

In the course of teaching Arabic I began encountering students, a group of students that we refer to in the profession as “heritage students”; that is, students who supposedly spoke Arabic, but wanted to learn how to read and write their native language. And it was during those encounters that I came to the realization (during my discussions with students from Syrian descent, Egyptian descent, Iraqi descent, American-born) who, in our discussions, when we were trying to formulate classes for them would tell us something to the effect that “I grew up speaking Arabic, but I don’t understand what goes on on “Al-Jazeera”.” Al-Jazeera was at that time the most watched Arabic-language television network; satellite TV network... And this is when I began asking questions. And this is a very interesting question, isn’t it? “I grew up speaking Arabic, and yet I do not understand what goes on on al-Jazeera although al-Jazeera is in Arabic; not because I cannot read Arabic, but because I truly can’t understand the “Arabic” that is being broadcast on al-Jazeera.... And this sort of caused a redirection in my doctoral research, and I began working on the idea of Linguistic Nationalism. And from that doctoral work came later on the book you have before you: Language Memory and Identity in the Middle East; The Case for Lebanon...

04:40 to 7:28

That book also caused me to begin asking questions about myself and my own Lebanese roots. I am originally Lebanese; I came to the United States at the age of 17; I grew up in a polyglot household; we spoke multiple languages; my paternal grand-father was Cuban-born; (as a child, I remember my grandfather playing the piano and singing to us in Spanish)... But I remember stories he used to tell us about living in Cuba; he had lived there until the age of 20, when he decided to move to Lebanon and ended up staying there. He used to tell us that the Lebanese of

Cuba were referred to locally as “Turcos”; that is to say, Turks; not Arabs, but “Turcos.” And that was on account of the fact that the early waves of Lebanese immigrants who came to the New World, to the Americas, to North America, but also to South America and the Caribbean, were speakers of Turkish. They spoke Turkish; they were subjects of the Ottoman Empire, and their spoken language was Turkish. And that is part of the reason why they earned that sobriquet “Turcos.” In North America... today, the dominant label in reference to the Lebanese in North America has become “Arabs” (or Arab Americans), but the early Lebanese immigrants of the 1860s were being referred to as “Syrians”, and that is because they themselves referred to themselves as “Syrians”; not because they were natives of what is today the Arab Republic of Syria (that Republic didn’t exist back then)... but because the Christians of what is today Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel referred to themselves as “Syrians”, and that was mainly a reflection of the names of the main Churches to which they belonged; Syrians in the sense that the liturgy of their Churches was Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic. And that label stuck until the instigation of the Arab national movement in the 1930s and 1940s, and that cause a switch in the labels that these people used to refer to themselves... and that is how the “Arab” label became more in vogue in our days.

07:30 to 08:02

My book attempts to look at the history of the term “Arab”, what we mean the word “Arab” when we refer to someone as an “Arab”, and it deals with the issue of language and how there is a certain symbiosis between the Arab “ethnicity”, or the Arab “cultural identity” if you will, and the Arabic language that is used as this nimbus or this focal point of this Arab identity.

08:03 to 11:40

About the history of opposition to the Arab national movement, or the idea that one’s identity is an Arab identity. This issue has a long history in the Middle East. And, actually, prior to the instigation of the Arab national movement in the 1920s and 1930s, there was a movement in the 1860s which was vibrant until the late 19th century, at a time when different subjects of the Ottoman Empire—let us keep in mind that the countries that we refer to today as “the Arab world” were, up until 1918 mere provinces in the Ottoman Empire. And the Ottoman Empire, by its very definition, was generally speaking a polyglot, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and generally very tolerant of this diversity. And so, although everybody within the Empire was a subject of the Ottoman Empire, the Ottoman Empire itself recognized the diversity of the different people that lived in the Ottoman dominions. Towards the end of the 19th century, there began an impulse within the Ottoman government and among the Ottoman elites towards “Turkification” of the different subjects of the Ottoman Empire. That is, the idea of advancing Turkish as a nationality or an ethnicity, and certainly advancing the Turkish language as a national language. Now, Turkish had been for 400 years prior the administrative language of the Ottoman Empire, and that’s why I began saying that my own grandparents were speakers of Turkish, among other languages... and that is because of the fact that the Ottoman Empire was a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual empire.

As a reaction by some people, some groups, some intellectuals within the Ottoman Empire—a reaction against the Turkification of the various communities that had lived in the Empire—there began a movement of Arabization. It was a group of elites, mainly in Beirut, but also in Alexandria—in Egypt—and in Cairo; groups referred to in the literature on the topic as “Syro-Lebanese immigrant groups” in Egypt. So, there began a movement of Arabic linguistic revival. It’s referred to in Arabic as “the Nahda”, which means “the renaissance...” ; the “Arab renaissance movement.” The spearheads of this movement were people who did not want to be looked upon as Turks, they wanted to latch onto a different kind of identity that were separated them. They were content with the idea of being Ottoman subjects. But now that the “Ottomanism” was turning into a “Turkish” identity, they wanted nothing to do with this Turkish identity. And so, they began elaborating different kinds of identities.

11:41 to 14:09

Among those identities that were being toyed with was the Pharaonic identity in Egypt; that is, the idea that says that the Egyptians proceed from a long ancient line of peoples, beginning with the ancient Pharaohs. A similar movement began being played around with in the area of what is today Syria and Lebanon, and that is “Syrianism”; the idea that the people of the region being an ancient “Syrian people”; not Turks, and no longer Ottomans. And in Lebanon, people started toying around with the idea of Phoenicianism; that is the peoples of Lebanon were descendants of the ancient Canaanite Phoenicians. Now, most of these intellectuals, who were versifying on those ideas, were writing about those ideas not in Turkish, but, for the first time in their history as members or subjects of the Ottoman Empire they began writing in Arabic. And this caused a revival of the Arabic language; modernization of the Arabic language. A language that had lain dormant for 400 years was all of a sudden being used to publish newspapers, books, journals of opinions... It was still very primitive, because it was a language that had not been used for 400 years... But it was being injected with new blood, new terminologies, new concepts, new words, new lexicons etc... And this is how the language that we refer to today as Modern Standard Arabic took flight, was born. I refer to it throughout my book as MSA (and that a shorthand for Modern Standard Arabic.) So, these people who were writing in Arabic were speaking about ideas of Phoenician descent and Canaanite descent and Syrian descent and Pharaonic descent happened to be—not by chance—mainly Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire. There were some Jews among them, but they were mainly Christians.

14:10 to 16:40

There were many reasons for that, but one of the main reasons had been that the Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Empire did not need to elaborate on a new history or excavate an old history, because they were full members of the Ottoman Empire; the Ottoman Empire being a Sunni-Muslim Empire, they didn’t need to elaborate a separate identity separate from that of the Empire. The Christians felt threatened by the idea of Turkification, so they began elaborating an idea of a kind of identity that was based on a “unity of language” that was no longer the Turkish language but was, rather, this new “Modern Standard Arabic.” So the Nahda, that is the Arabic Literary Renaissance movement, which had been in the 1880s and 1890s a strictly literary movement, was co-opted in the 1920s and 1930s, by the votaries of Political “Arab nationalism”, turned into the early stirrings of Arabism/Arab nationalism, and re-baptized the “Arabic Nahda”. So, the Nada, the Arabic Literary (and linguistic) Renaissance movement was re-baptized (misleadingly) in the 1920s and 1930s as the “votaries Arabic National Renaissance Movement. So, it was politicized in the 1920s and 30s, whereas it had been in the 1880s and 1890s a purely literary movement. So, the question about the history of these rival movements that were supposedly “rivals” of Arab nationalism, I’m not sure I can term those movements as “rivals” of Arab nationalism, because they preceded Arab nationalism; they were movements that used the Arabic language as an intellectual or a literary medium to speak of ideals and identities that were neither Arabic nor Turkish, but rather ancient identities that preceded Arabs and Turks in the region. So, there is a long history to this rivalry between Arabism and other nationalisms, but I’m not sure I can refer to it as a “rivalry” per se; I would say that the idea of a Syrian people, or the Phoenician people, or the Canaanite people, or the Pharaonic people was perhaps a predecessor of Arab nationalism

16:41 to 19:42

What I am proposing in this book is a new reading of the history and the identities of the people of the Middle East; not to challenge the prevalent paradigm, which tends to view the region as this monolith of Arab and “Arabic speakers”, but to add or rediscover or re-excavate another layer of identities that are still extant in the Middle East, that are not dead.. and that is, the idea of the imbrications or layerings of cultures and identities and languages in

the Middle East, throughout its millenarian history. The prevalent tendency today, inside and outside of the academy, is look at the Middle East as this uniform preserve of Arabs and Arabic speakers; and this fallacy is based on the idea that these peoples (the Middle Easterners) use the Arabic language; that is, that the language of their daily parlance is Arabic. That assumption is false for two reasons: 1) that there are many other languages, besides Arabic, which are used in the daily parlance of the Middle East; and 2) what we refer to as the “Arabic language,” as this uniform nimbus of Arabness, this symbol of “being an Arab”, is not a spoken language. Modern Standard Arabic is a learned language; it’s a language that nobody acquires natively—people born in Lebanon, Syria, the Palestinian territories, Iraq, etc., grow up speaking a language that is as different (in the words of Harvard linguist Wheeler Thackston) these people whom we refer to as Arabs or speakers of Arabic actually grow up speaking (natively) a language that is as different from Arabic as English is different from Latin. That is to say, if we look at English as the natively acquired language and what we learn to read and write when we go to school as Latin, the various people of the Middle East, whom we refer to as Arabs, actually grow up speaking a variety of (native) languages that we term dialects, but languages that are as different from Arabic as English is different from Latin.

19:44 to 23:14

So, the first assumption was that all of these peoples of the Middle East are users and speakers of the Arabic language, and that is a false assumption because there are actually 33 different language varieties that we falsely and misleadingly refer to as “Arabic”, and one Modern Standard Arabic. Some of these 33 different varieties are sometimes mutually comprehensible; others are completely mutually incomprehensible. A good analogy would be perhaps living in the Pyrenees border region of France and Spain; villagers living on either sides of the border would be able to understand each other, even with each of them speaking their specific dialects of French and Spanish respectively... And the farther away one gets from this border area, the French dialect of the Pyrenees becomes more closely associated with Standard French and the Spanish dialect of the Pyrenees more closely associated with Standard Castilian Spanish, and mutual comprehensibility ceases. That is precisely the case with many places in the Middle East. So, naturally, Syrians, Lebanese, Palestinians, and some Iraqis can arguably understand each other’s dialects, and the farther away a Lebanese gets from Lebanon towards North Africa or the deep Gulf region, one is faced with complete linguistic breakdown and mutual comprehensibility ceases entirely. This is one problem with the assumption of the “Arab world” as this single monolithic language zone. The other problem is that, contrary to what we used to here in the West; here in the West we usually use the same set of cognate words to refer to nationality, ethnicity, language, identity, and territory. In other words, a Frenchman lives in a country called France, he is French, he speaks French. So, we use the same root-word (French) to refer to ethnicity, nationality, territory, culture, and language. This sort of categorization does not apply to the Middle East. The Middle East has for millennia spoken different languages. As I mentioned earlier, there had been layers of cultures and civilizations that have come to the Middle East and controlled the area, with each civilization coming along and imposing its language as a lingua franca. To give an example, 5000 years ago Sumerians were the people that controlled the entire Middle East. They emerged from the area of today’s Iraq, and spread out throughout the region. Sumerians spoke a language that we refer to as Sumerian (Sumerian is by the way not a Semitic language; in other words, it is not genetically related to any of the languages in use in the modern Middle East today.)

23:15 to 26:00

Sumerian became a language of empire for about two millennia, which meant that people who were bona fide Sumerians spoke Sumerian, and people who were not Sumerians also spoke Sumerian. People who did not recognize themselves, who did not refer to themselves as Sumerians still spoke Sumerians. This culture, its language and its civilization had a long run; after that it was replaced over time by the Babylonians; the Babylonians also spread their language and made it into a lingua franca spoken throughout the Middle East, spoken by Babylonians and non-Babylonians. Aramaeans came on to the scene and also spread the Aramaic language. Thus, Aramaic

became a language spoken by many people, including the Canaanites, but mainly the Israelites, the Jews, the Hebrews, whose spoken language had initially been Hebrew, a Canaanite language; that language was replaced by Aramaic. The Hebrews did not lose their Hebrew identity, their Canaanite identity, although they did use natively a language other than Hebrew. I give an example in my classes taken from that famous movie by Mel Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ*. One of the exquisitely accurate historical moments in that movie relates to the use of language. So there you have the figure of Christ speaking in Aramaic; it was one of the impulses of the film-maker, I think, to give this film authenticity. So, Jesus spoke Aramaic; he spoke with his mother in Aramaic, spoke to some of his disciples in Aramaic; but that character was also a very typical Jew of his times, a very typical Eastern Mediterranean, Middle Easterner of the times in that he was a polyglot; so, he was speaking to his jailers in Greek, because Greek was the language of the masses at the time (Greek succeeded Aramaic and became the common language of Middle Easterners). Jesus also spoke to the Roman administrator, to the Governor, to the representative of Caesar in Palestine in Latin, because that was the language of the Administration. The fact that Jesus was multi-lingual did not denude him of his Jewish Hebrew Israelite identity.

26:01 to 27:09

So, what I'm trying to say is that because of its geographic location at the crossroads of three continents, the Eastern Mediterranean, or the Middle East, which we refer to as the Levant region, this area saw a procession of conquerors and civilizations. Some of them stayed for a long time, others were mere passersby who left a few imprints behind them and move on. But traces of these civilizations have remained in the fact that many people in the modern Middle East have maintained memories of these bygone times, still speak modern languages that are connected to (or are outcomes and syntheses) of these ancient languages, and as I began saying, from Sumerian we moved into Babylonian, into Aramaic, into Persian, then Greek, then Latin, then Turkish, Arabic, and then French and English towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. So, that's the story of my book.

27:10 to 31:20

The impact of MSA on intellectual and cultural life in the modern Middle East: unfortunately MSA remains the preserve of a very small group of people. According to the 2002 UNRHD in the Middle East, the level of literacy in the Middle East hovers around 50 to 55%, which tells me that about 50 or 55% of the people of the Middle East, whom we traditionally refer to as Arabs, are unable to speak, unable to read, unable to write—and not only unable to read and write, but who are also unable to speak their national language, Modern Standard Arabic. As I said before, due to the fact that this language is one that is acquired through coaching, through schooling, and since not everybody gets the chance to go to school, not everybody acquires this language. And even those who acquire it, those who are able to function in Modern Standard Arabic, do so only in constructed situations; they cannot do so spontaneously, extemporaneously. The analogy that I like to give is, when we teach MSA, Modern Standard Arabic, it's as if we were teaching our students here at BC, giving them four years of Latin, and dropping them on a street-corner in Milan—Italy, and telling them “okay, now go speak, communicate with the native Napolitans!!” That is exactly the same situation we face in the Modern Middle East when we teach Modern Standard Arabic. And the reason why we teach Modern Standard Arabic is because it is the only language variety in the Middle East that has been standardized, that has been codified, a language for which we have books, and for which we have a written literature. Now,

there is a sizeable corpus of written literature in dialects as well, that is in the languages that we commonly refer to as “dialects”, but those dialects have not yet been codified. So people who write in their local dialects sometimes use the Arabic script; those who, for instance, write Judaeo-Arabic use the Hebrew script; in Lebanon the Christians

who write in their dialects use the Syriac script, Syriac being the language of their Churches, to which they know the script (the written form) and use this script to render their non-Syriac spoken dialects in written form. The Arabic script itself is not capable of capturing the panoply of sounds produced in dialectal languages, so the Syriac script is used to fill this lacuna of Arabic's. But these attempts at codifying spoken vernacular languages have not gained recognition (or legitimacy) yet. This is due mainly to the "prestige" of Modern Standard Arabic; this is due mainly to the symbiotic relationship that Modern Standard Arabic maintains with a major world religion, Islam, and there is this tendency to think that were we to write down a dialect, we would diminish the prestige of Modern Standard Arabic. So, many modern Middle Eastern intellectuals today, who are leading writers in their spoken dialects avoid writing, or at least avoid publishing in their dialectal languages, because they fear that this might affect the prestige of Modern Standard Arabic.

31:22 to 34:25

But that was an issue that Medieval Europeans had to also deal with. When Church Latin was the prestige language, was the only language deemed worthy of being written down, speakers of the "French dialect of Latin," or the "Italian dialect of Latin," or the "Spanish dialect of Latin" etc.. (of course I am oversimplifying here, that is not what those languages were called), but people who spoke various dialects of Latin in Medieval times were afraid to write down their spoken dialects because Latin was the only language that was deemed worthy of being written. But eventually the Latin monopoly was broken, and the people who instigated this (I would say) "revolution" were people/writers whom we know today, and whom world "literary history" and the academy remember fondly: Dante for instance in the case of Italy, Cervantes in the case of Spain, Ronsard and Joachim du Bellay in the case of France, etc... Those were people who were fought viciously by their own cohorts, by their friends and colleagues in the academy, keepers of the Latin orthodoxy and the Latin linguistic canon. This is to show you what a powerful Latin orthodoxy was and how psychologically chained people and intellectuals were by this idea that one shouldn't sully a sacred language (Latin) by writing in a profane language (the so-called "dialects" of Latin.) When Dante wrote "La Comedia" (which we call today "The Divine Comedy"), he hadn't then named it "The Divine Comedy" yet; it was deemed and named "Divine" posthumously, due to its subject matter, certainly, but some argue that it was rebaptized "La Divina Comedia" because of its divine language, because of the exquisite language (a dialect mind you) that Dante used to write "The Comedy." And we have to remember that Dante is "the child", "the student" of Virgil; he was the "Prince" of Latin, he wrote exquisite Latin long before writing "The Divine Comedy." And so, Dante was fought vehemently by his colleagues at the Florence Academy. I don't know exactly what they told him, but they must have excoriated him with something to the effect that "how dare you, how could you have written in this lowly dialect, in the language of the plebians, the language of servants and commoners??" And Dante's answer was, I imagine, "look, this language that you're attacking, that you're describing as a lowly dialect and the language of commoners and servants, is the very language you are using to attack me; you're not attacking me in the sublime Latin; you're attacking me in Tuscan, in the language of the servants, but in the spoken language of my mother and your mothers, and the language of our Prince... so it is a princely language, it is not a lowly language..."

34:26 to 37:32

And the same thing happened with French, the same thing happened with Castilian, with Spanish. So, it took these courageous individuals who were willing to go against the orthodoxies of the time and produce works of universal quality in a lowly language, in a lowly dialect in order to give those dialects the élan and move them to the plane of a language rather than a dialect. And, I think this is what the Middle East is awaiting today. There have been attempts at this throughout the 1920s and 1940s, very influential intellectuals in Egypt, but also in Lebanon and in Syria, began playing around with the idea of writing down and codifying their individual dialects. But those individuals were fought, accused of subversion, and driven into obscurity and self-imposed mutism. Many of them have been completely erased from the literary canon of the modern Middle East: an Egyptian by the name of Salama Moussa

for instance, who in the early 1920s was advocating for the writing of the Egyptian language (dialect), was completely erased from the literary history of the region. One of Moussa's mentors, Taha Husayn, made a switch in the 1950s back to Arabic, even though he had initially been one of the most passionate advocates on behalf of an "Egyptian language"—as mentioned earlier he was fought on account of that, he was accused of being a traitor to Islam, to Arabness—and he made a switch back to Modern Standard Arabic, and as a result, he is today considered in many circles the "doyen of modern Arabic belles lettres." So, he regained his "dignified" status if you will, because he reconverted back to unequivocal advocacy on behalf of Arabic. But there are intellectuals today, especially in Lebanon, who are still toying around with the idea. And Lebanon has traditionally been a laboratory in the Middle East, where new ideas are taken on a test-drive, as is Lebanon in a sense a barometer and a bellwether of looming changes in the region. So, there are people today in Lebanon, who are not only considering the codification of their spoken vernacular language, but who are actually publishing respectable works of literature in spoken Lebanese as opposed to the traditional Arabic.

37:33 to 40:56

Can the case of Lebanon be indicative of positive changes sweeping through the Middle East? I did mention earlier that Lebanon had been a place where new ideas have been tested; it is hoped that the ideas that are being considered in Lebanon will catch on. What I can tell from reading the literature, from visiting different websites, from reading the media, and from observing what the young do today with their spoken languages, there are salient changes sweeping through the region. I don't know that this can be attributed directly to Lebanon—it can probably be attributed at least in part to Globalization and to the democratization of the computer and internet, and the limitations of the Arabic script when it comes to putting down in writing the spoken dialects. In other words, young people who communicate on the Internet usually don't use an Arabic keyboard; when they communicate in writing, in IMS or Text Messaging, they do so in their spontaneous native languages, not in the constructed stilted Modern Standard Arabic. So, they are using the Roman script to text and communicate on the Internet. Because the Roman script is more capable of capturing the whole spectrum of sounds in the spoken languages, it is privileged over the cumbersome and inaccurate Arabic script. To give you an example, the Arabic language has only 3 vowels; that's it; "Aa," "Uu," "Eee," those are the vowels of Arabic. And therefore, there are only 3 symbols to represent those three sounds. The different spoken dialects, spoken by Palestinians, by Lebanese, by Syrians, by Jordanians, by Iraqis etc..., contain at least six vowels. Now, how can you accurately represent six vowels when the Arabic script provides with only three symbols to connote vowels? That is why the Roman script is becoming more in vogue, because it is capable of accurately representing these sounds. The Lebanese dialect has eight vowels. So, people are becoming acquainted with the functionality of the Roman script. So, it's not only an issue pertaining to Lebanon; it's not only because Lebanon is doing this and we want to be cool and imitate Lebanon, because Lebanon has a liberal society that is open to the Mediterranean etc., so, it's cool to do as the Lebanese do. No! The Roman script is used prevalently today because it has functional value. And that is catching on. Sometimes, I might have a text before me written in a Latin-based script; a legible text that I can sound out, but I can't understand. That is so because it is written in a dialect that I'm not familiar with (it's sort of like an Anglophone trying to read a French text; the alphabet is the same, but the languages are different.)

40:56 to 44:05

This is causing a slew of different new discoveries (about selfhood, memory, and identity) throughout the Middle East; discoveries of pre-Arab identities or pre-Arab civilizations that have come on to the region prior to the period in which Arabs and Arabic have become dominant. By getting acquainted with writing one's spoken language in a script different from the dominant, canonized Arabic script, the young of the Middle East are getting acquainted with the idea that the sounds of their spoken language (and their representation accurately in another script) can lead to those sounds being read to mean something different from their subsumed "Arabic" meanings. [...] I'll give some

examples from the Palestinian Territories in a little bit, about place-names; I began talking earlier about the layering of civilizations that came on to the region of the Middle East; about 95% of place-names in Syria and Lebanon for instance reflect that checkered history; about 95% of those place-names are Aramaic, not Arabic. They sound Arabic because we have acquired the bad habit of writing them in the Arabic script; but once they are rendered in the Aramaic script, the Syriac script, or even in the Hebrew script, one begins to pronounce them the way they were intended to be pronounced, and one realizes that the kinship that those toponyms have is an Aramaic and Canaanite, not an Arabic kinship. Now, all Semitic languages have a wealth of common words with common roots and some common meanings, but once one begins to parse the grammars of those languages, one realizes that the linguistic kinship is one that is apparent, not real. To give you an example, the capital of Lebanon is “Bayroot”; it is rendered “Bayroot” in written Arabic; it has no meaning whatsoever in Arabic. (Try to imagine the name of a supposedly major “Arab” metropolis that has no known meaning in the national language!!!) But like I said, 95% of the names of towns and villages in Lebanon are Aramaic. So, Beirut is one example; it has no meaning in Arabic. But if you were to render “Beirut” in writing, and do so in the Syriac script (or the Aramaic script, or even in the Roman script) rather than relying on the (limitative and inaccurate) Arabic script, “Bayroot” would be rendered “Beerot”. Due to the fact that the “O” sound does not exist in Arabic (and naturally has no representation in the Arabic script), it is represented by the “U” symbol. So, when “Beirut” is rendered “Beerot”, you’re taking the name back to its Canaanite roots, and you will realize that the meaning of the town is “the wells.” The word “Beer” in Canaanite (and in spoken Lebanon) refers to “a well”, “Beerot” is the plural form of the singular “well.”

44:06 to 46:54

My hope with this book is to try to steer the conversation on the Middle East and Middle Eastern identities away from the cozy neat little paradigms that we have formed for ourselves about this area being a monolith and a preserve of a single people, speaking the same unified coherent uniform language, the outcome of a single tradition, a single culture and a single historical experience. In this book, I try to look at the wider picture and try to instigate a wider conversation and a wider contextualization of the Middle East, and begin to recognize the area for its diversity really rather than by way of the narrow prisms through which we have grown accustomed seeing it: that is, as this single monolithic uniform preserve of one single people, which in reality it’s not. I am hoping that by consenting to view the area in its diversity will help us perhaps begin dealing with it in a better manner, with more clarity about the roots of its problems. So far, I think I’ve been lucky that reactions to my book have been overall positive ones; and that’s very encouraging. But I know that sometimes going against established orthodoxies is not a pretty thing, and the “honey-moon” that I’ve been having will perhaps prove to be a short-lived one. I am certain—and I welcome that, because my aim is to instigate a lively debate—but I’m certain that the keepers of the Arab nationalist canon, and in certain circles in Middle East Studies, this book’s thesis is bound to be attacked, and for good reason, because it challenges the jealously held orthodoxies that we have constructed around the Middle East, its assumed unity and the unity of the Arab ethos and its Arabic language.