

LEBANESE MYTHOLOGY

Killing Mr. Lebanon: The Assassination of Rafik Hariri and Its Impact on the Middle East, by Nicholas Blanford. London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006. xxii + 219 pages. Notes to p. 230. Index to p. 236. \$29.95 hard.

Reviewed by Amer Mohsen

Following the 2005 assassination of Rafik Hariri, a mythology was instantly created around his person and legacy. Used extensively in the political campaign that became known as the "Cedar Revolution," television programs, documentaries, and songs idolizing the ex-prime minister also started to fill the Lebanese airwaves and canonize Hariri as an unadulterated symbol of Lebanese nationalism, independence, and modernity. Nicholas Blanford's *Killing Mr. Lebanon: The Assassination of Rafik Hariri and Its Impact on the Middle East*, far from casting a critical eye on this mode of history-writing, reproduces elements of this mythology.

In many ways, *Killing Mr. Lebanon* is an example of a book that falls victim to its sources. The author, a Beirut correspondent for the *Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Daily Star*, largely based his work on extensive interviews with members of Hariri's political and business

entourage—many of whom were, and remain, in the employ of the Hariri family, a fact that is not mentioned in the book. Their views color the analysis and the narrative with little critical screening by the author.

For instance, Blanford all but adopts the view of the Hariri political camp—at the time of the writing of the book—unequivocally blaming Syria for the murder of the ex-prime minister. Blanford narrates the events that led to the assassination as "a Shakespearian tragedy of misunderstanding" (p. xxi) between the Lebanese leader and the Syrian regime. This tale of "misunderstanding" is perhaps the weakest part of the book. In trying to reconcile the image of Hariri (largely created after his death) as a crusader for Lebanese independence from Syria with the historical facts—that Hariri built his political legacy under Syrian tutelage and that, during his long political career, he never went on record criticizing the Syrian military presence in Lebanon—Blanford presents the contradictory thesis that Hariri was killed both because he "sought to foster a new relationship with Syria, a state-to-state partnership of mutual respect" (p. 118) and because he chose the losing side in a battle of wings within the Damascus regime. As a result, Hariri comes across as an "undercover" opposition figure. According to the author, "[Hariri] had decided to align himself fully with the . . . opposition" but "he had yet to go public" (p. 125).

In describing the years of Syrian military presence in Lebanon, Blanford relies on a rich oral tradition detailing Syrian practices in the 1990s, narrating how Syrian officers fixed elections, "created" members of parliament and ministers, and became deeply involved in the rampant corruption and financial scandals of postwar Lebanon. But even in this regard, a Hariri-centered vision of history dominates: Ghazi Kan'an, the Syrian military intelligence commander in Lebanon and Hariri's close ally, is described sympathetically as charismatic, urbane, and even "a gentleman"—someone with "a deep understanding and even affection for the Lebanese milieu" (p. 89). By contrast, Rustom Ghazali, Kan'an's predecessor, who had a turbulent relationship with Hariri, is presented as "clodhopping, brutal and stupid" (p. 89), a man with little

Amer Mohsen is a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of California, Berkeley.

intellectual aptitude or curiosity. This may very well be how the Hariri entourage contrasted the two men, but even a little independent research would have uncovered that Kan'an was personally involved in some of the most violent episodes of the Lebanese war, including a massacre in Tripoli in the 1980s that cost the lives of hundreds. Ghazali, on the other hand, pursued a PhD on the history of Lebanese families during his tenure in Lebanon.

To be fair, Blanford seeks a degree of balance by interviewing a handful of Hariri's critics, although one of the critics' names is misspelled (Asim Qanso's name is spelled "Qassem Qanso" throughout the book). Overall, the number of Arabic names and terms that are incorrectly spelled or transliterated (including the name of Hariri's own father, Baha' al-Deen, which appears in the book as "Bahieddine Hariri") is astonishing for a journalist who has lived in Lebanon for over a decade.

The greatest problem with the book, however, pertains to what goes unmentioned, uninvestigated. Blanford's identification with an institutional narrative of Rafik Hariri's person has seemingly led him to assimilate the institution's own taboos. Hariri began his political career in the 1980s as a Saudi national and the personal envoy of King Fahd and was regarded throughout this period as a representative of Saudi policy in Lebanon; but nothing is uttered about the political dynamics between Hariri and Riyadh beyond 1985. Equally, some of the most important junctures in Hariri's career are side-stepped, notably the 2000 parliamentary elections, a real watershed that crowned Hariri as a lone "Sunni" leader and ended the influence of long-reigning political dynasties. In sum, Blanford's book does not document or interrogate the process through which Hariri was mythologized after his death but rather is very much part of that process.