Makdisi, Ussama. *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World.*
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*Age of Coexistence* offers a fresh look at the making of the modern Arab world. Given the plethora of studies about the wars and sectarian violence in the contemporary Middle East, this well-researched study employs Arabic and western resources that challenge the prevailing perceptions about the region and its people. Ussama Makdisi conjoins the centrality of religion in the Mashriq with the idea of the process of building, what he calls the “ecumenical frame.” Employing this term that denounces “religious fanaticism,” the author attempts to reconcile secular political equality with Muslim law that governed the Islamic Ottoman Empire. Despite their diverse ethnicities and religions, this frame upheld equality among all citizens and safeguarded the political and legal order of secularity, as well as the gendered “personal status” (7-8). According to Makdisi, literate Arab subjects sought to explore secularism and religious coexistence for a modern nation-state under the Ottomans from within this recalibrated context. After the Ottoman Empire fell to colonial Britain and France, who divided the spoils of Empire between them, Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Mashriq continued their efforts to sustain an ecumenical coexistence. The colonial frame, however, offered major challenges to the Arab intellectual and political transformation.

The book is in two parts, with an introduction and epilogue. Part One deals with the Ottoman Empire up to the breakdown of the imperial system in the nineteenth century, and Part Two traces the history of the Mashriq in the post-Ottoman period after the Ottoman defeat in 1917.

Chapter 1 lays out the workings of the ecumenical coexistence before the nineteenth century under the supremacy of the Ottomans in their multi-ethnic, multi-religious imperium. Makdisi argues that imperial Istanbul was able to distribute privileges that afforded civil and religious autonomy to all their subjects in return for loyalty and obedience, without evading cultural differences or denying the existence of discriminatory Muslim law. Until the rise of nationalism, secularism, and the call for nation-states in Europe, there was no ideology regarding equal rights, citizenship, or the Jewish question: tolerance existed side-by-side with
coercion within the larger ethos of coexistence. Chapter 2 examines how the rise of nationalism in the Balkans and Anatolia, and the interventions of imperial Europeans on behalf of non-Muslims, threatened Ottoman supremacy, an issue that would also seep into the Levant. Consequently, Tanzimat were introduced by the Ottomans. These new laws were non-discriminatory reforms to counter European interventions on behalf of Christians across both the northern parts of the Empire and the Arabic-speaking Mashriq. The Tanzimat were ambiguous and were implemented differently across the Empire, the author asserts. Chapter 3 discusses the divisions that came to the fore in the nineteenth century between the northern part of Empire and the Levant. While the fight for national independence took hold of the Balkans and Anatolia, resulting in outright wars in Greece and Bulgaria, the Levant did not experience such nationalism. Instead, these conditions gave rise to Ottoman Muslim nationalism, resulting in the major ethnic cleansing of Armenian Christians beginning in the 1890s. Paradoxically, the Arab-speaking Mashriq experienced what is usually referred to as the *Nahda*, a renaissance in education, writing, translations, and culture in general. The author contends that the “nahda ecumenism emerged as a counterpoint to Turkish nationalism, and that both manifested the limits and possibilities of a *modern* nationalist age” (21). Why did the Arabs in the Mashriq opt for a cultural nahda rather than an Arab nationalism? Had Makdisi explored the causes of the cultural transformation it would have provided an interesting critique to the Mashriq at this historical juncture.

Part Two of the *Age of Coexistence* examines how the colonial interventions in the Mashriq shattered the existing ecumenical framework. While claiming religious freedom and self-determination, Britain and France ironically supported religious sectarianism. The Arab-speaking Mashriq, now under the ambivalent colonial mandate system, had to adapt to new contradictions within the new political system of “divide and rule.” The ultimate destruction of the ecumenical framework came about with the pitching of Arab against Jew, when the colonial powers promised and implanted European political Zionism in Palestine. Makdisi offers an insightful juxtaposition of the impact of colonial Zionist project on Palestinians and Jews alike. European Zionism, which arose in racialized Europe, not only caused the Nakba by displacing Palestinian Muslims and Christians from their homeland. It also displaced the Jewish Arabs across the Mashriq: “The destruction of the idea that one could be simultaneously Arab and Jewish still scars the Arab world [and the Zionist movement]” (22).

*Age of Coexistence* is a valuable study to scholars and students of Middle East Studies, History, and Peace and Conflict Studies.