BOOK REVIEW

Abi-Rashed, Joelle. *'Asfuriyyeh: A History of Madness, Modernity, and War in the Middle East*.

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020. 312 pages. Hardback \$45.00

Reviewed by Jamil Sbitan

In *'Asfuriyyeh: A History of Madness, Modernity, and War in the Middle East*, Joelle Abi-Rached charts the institutional history of one of the oldest, and most storied, psychiatric hospitals in Lebanon and the wider Middle East. From its initial founding in 1900 through its demise during the Lebanese Civil War that led to its closure, the author draws an image of a medical institution situated at the helm of twentieth-century political and economic transformations. Offering an incisive contribution to various fields, the book particularly carves out a critical space within the history of science and medicine in the Middle East. In doing so, Abi-Rached, a Lebanese doctor-turned-historian-of-science, situates questions of scientific epistemology and psychiatry in the Middle East within their specific historical and sociopolitical trajectories, rather than subsuming them within the post-colonial tropes that have long marred these debates.

'Asfuriyyeh is the story of the triumph of psychiatric care, a history of an institution that managed to thrive for over eight tumultuous decades. Styled as a topo-history, an intellectual biography of a “modern medical ruin” (193), the book gives an intimate view of the various institutional, intellectual, political, and material linkages that furnished the hospital’s conditions of possibility. These linkages not only give a sense of the internal world of the institution, but of the broader landscape of the imbrication of structural forces with medical-psychiatric power and its modern ascendancy.

The central claim governing the text runs up against a historiographical orthodoxy surrounding the relationship between science and colonialism in the Middle East: while the hospital was established by a Quaker missionary in the late nineteenth century, Abi-Rached does not overdetermine this founding moment as an original sin that colors the hospital’s near-century existence. Rather, she insists on a longue durée approach that rejects a narrow reading of psychiatry as a mere “tool

Jamil Sbitan is a doctoral student in the Department of History at Columbia University in New York, NY.

of empire” or a technology deployed to discipline populations towards avowedly colonial ends (p. 17). Abi-Rached further positions ‘Asfuriyyeh’s history against a post-structuralist hermeneutic hegemony wherein asylums and hospitals are generally seen as carceral spaces of confinement and control (p. 17). Instead, her case study draws on various original sources to painstakingly demonstrate ‘Asfuriyyeh’s overall progressive posture and Hippocratic ethos. Thus, while Abi-Rached believes that historically mental illness became a novel object of concern and visibility, she contends that it is irreducible to either a biological or sociological process (p. 20). In other words, the text’s undergirding framework does not assume that the mentally ill are merely produced by psychiatric institutions, even while recognizing the discursive and sociological forces at work.

The book’s six chapters chronicle ‘Asfuriyyeh’s lifespan in order to situate it within a broader sociopolitical frame. Chapter 1 paints the hospital’s foundational years in the context of the Levant’s *fin de siècle* intellectual milieu. This milieu involved both a missionary and civilizational discourse on “Oriental madness,” erasing a long tradition of Arab-Islamic medicine and the medieval institution of the bimaristan. Bimaristan was designed to care for the mentally ill, combined with the Nahda’s intellectual preoccupation with the new sciences of the mind (p. 38). Nahdawi intellectuals, Abi-Rached notes, were not mere passive recipients of “western” ideas, but were themselves active in the translation and production of knowledge. They also mounted critiques surrounding the deterioration of the bimaristan and the mistreatment of the mentally ill. Nahdawis welcomed the establishment of ‘Asfuriyyeh as “the Lebanese bimaristan,” as opposed to flatly viewing it as a colonial intrusion (p. 48).

Chapter 2 further problematizes a reading of science-as-colonial-import by charting the development of ‘Asfuriyyeh during its missionary phase. Conflicts among missionaries, namely Protestants and Catholics, paradoxically furnished possibilities for its fruition in Lebanon. This was due, in part, to the Protestants’ investment in mental philosophy as a way to proselytize Muslims and combat Jesuits who, in turn, viewed these discourses as forms of heresy (p. 76). The hospital also benefitted from its partnership with another institution founded by Protestants, the American University of Beirut.

Chapter 3 details how ‘Asfuriyyeh’s successive phases would lead to its secularization and medicalization. Abi-Rached demonstrates the hospital’s metamorphosis into a national, and eventually regional, institution, with religion becoming a mere “footnote” in the hospital’s “ethos of care” (p. 78). The withering of the hospital’s missionary zeal further saw notable linkages forged between expert knowledge of the mind and criminal law in Lebanon.

Chapter 4 addresses the growing prestige of psychiatry, evidenced by the hospital’s increased patient admissions and demand by mid-century (p. 101).

The author traces the ways in which medical practice and this institution were increasingly regularized and secularized. Even the word “insane” was dropped from ‘Asfuriyyeh’s name (p. 125). She further notes the overall absence of a social critique of psychiatric power in the Middle East during this period, distinguishing it from the trajectory of Western anti-psychiatry movements of the 1960s and 1970s (p. 110). This absence of critique was interrupted only by the hospitalization of the poet Mayy Ziadah, a high-profile case that incited an uproar, which Abi-Rached reads as informed by the stigmatization of mental illness that ‘Asfurriyyeh sought to combat.

Chapter 5 demonstrates how the Lebanese Civil War all but dismantled ‘Asfuriyyeh’s vision. The hospital had initiated an ambitious program of mental health provision, as well as a broader conversation on science and society. Beginning in 1975 onwards, however, there were shortages of supplies and precarious finances. Patients also faced kidnapping, murder, disappearance, and sexual violence by armed militias. The hospital was forced to officially cease operations in 1982, a mere two months before Israel invaded Lebanon and occupied the hospital’s premises (p. 154). Layered with the material and psychic traumas of war, ‘Asfuriyyeh’s physical shell later became the military barracks for the Syrian army (p. 155).

‘Asfuriyyeh’s demise reveals a lack of distinction between the internal world of the institution and the external one of the sociopolitical. As Abi-Rached shows in chapter 6, this was evidenced by the postwar emergence of a pattern of mental healthcare organized around the logic of sects—a clear departure from ‘Asfuriyyeh’s nonsectarian practice (p. 177). Indeed, the author meticulously demonstrates the ways in which nonsectarianism was no mere propaganda relegated to the hospital’s catalogues, but a condition of possibility for its existence, as well as a feature in its patient distribution and staff. A cinematic image shows the discharge of patients by sect during the war—to Christian areas for Christians, and Muslim areas for Muslims. This image ultimately symbolizes that the undergirding conditions of existence for the hospital had been rendered into rubble (p. 144).

‘*Asfuriyyeh* is a path-breaking undertaking in scope, tenor, and method. Its rigorous, erudite scholarship about a truly singular institution opens up novel problem-spaces that interrogate uncritical embrace of notions of epistemology and intellectual derivation. The text also fosters a rich terrain for further research into the relationship between science, state violence, and political economy in the Middle East. It is an impressive, critical feat that is sure to become seminal in a number of fields, including the history and anthropology of science, Middle Eastern studies, and the political, social, and intellectual history of Lebanon, and beyond.