



Building Bridges: Michel Chiha and the Construction of Modern Lebanon.

Tendiendo puentes: Michel Chiha y la construcción del Líbano moderno.

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Abstract

For almost three decades, the banker, journalist—and occasional poet—Michel Chiha (1891-1951) constructed, through the pages of his newspaper, *Le Jour*, a possibilist approach to Lebanese nationhood that was directly influential in the configuration of the National Pact and, ultimately, Lebanese independence. However, and despite the prominent role his thought played in the construction of the 'Lebanese formula', his work has been sorely overseen and misunderstood by scholarship. Analyzing Chiha's editorial production, this paper will underline how this author's cosmopolitan philosophy came to define the Lebanese self-perceptions of identity, defining constitutional practices until the present.

Keywords: Lebanon, Identity, pluralism, nation-State, nationalism, *laissez-faire*.



Resumen

Durante casi tres décadas, el banquero, periodista—y ocasional poeta—Michel Chiha (1891-1951) construyó, a través de las páginas del diario *Le Jour*, una visión posibilista de la nacionalidad libanesa que tuvo un peso decisivo tanto en la formación del Pacto Nacional como en lograr la independencia. Sin embargo, y a pesar del papel fundamental que su pensamiento jugó en la construcción de la ‘fórmula libanesa’, no ha gozado éste del favor de la academia. Mediante el análisis de la producción editorial de Chiha, este artículo subrayará la influencia que la filosofía cosmopolita de este autor tuvo en la definición de las autopercepciones identitarias de los libaneses, llegando a definir sus prácticas constitucionales hasta el día de hoy.

Palabras Clave: Líbano, Identidad, pluralismo, estado-nación, nacionalismo, *laissez-faire*.

Introduction

Throughout almost three decades of journalistic activity, the banker and politician Michel Chiha set out, from the editorial pages of the newspaper he owned, *Le Jour*, a practical philosophy that would rapidly establish itself as the fundamental interpretative guide of prewar Lebanese politics. Committed to Islamo-Christian cooperation, economic liberalism, and Western alignment—particularly in the context of a nascent Cold War, Chiha’s thought became, rather unsurprisingly, the philosophical pillar of a Lebanon that unashamedly conceived of itself as a *Merchant Republic*, a traders’ island at the very heart of the Middle East.

In spite of Chiha’s central role in building the ideological apparatus underlying independent Lebanon’s state formation, his intellectual work has remained sorely forgotten by the literature. Leaving aside a booklet published in the aftermath of his death by his friend Evelyne Bustros (*Michel Chiha: Évocations*) and a couple of studies that appeared before the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War (Jean Salem’s *Introduction à la pensée politique de Michel Chiha* and Maha F. Samara’s PhD dissertation *The Ideas of Michel Chiha*), the only monograph consecrated to the man whose political doctrine had directly contributed to the establishment of a pluralistic and democratic Lebanese Republic has been Fawaz Traboulsi’s 1999 *Silat bila Wasl. Mishal Shiha wa-l-idiyulujyyat al-lubnaniyya*.

Against this background of historiographical oversight, this paper tries to offer a modest contribution to the rediscovery of Michel Chiha as a key player in the political configuration of the Lebanese state. It also aims at shedding a renewed light on his thought, which, as will be explained below, went well beyond the mere articulation of the concrete élite agreement that propelled Lebanese independence to construct a specifically Lebanese approach to modernity, whereby the formalized structures of a modern state can be successfully combined with the survival of traditional bonds and ties. A brief excursus on the constitutional mechanisms of post-war Lebanon will serve,

furthermore, to illustrate the importance that Chiha's thought still holds within the country's political system.

Historical Context

On September 1, 1920, General Henri Gouraud proclaimed the establishment of Greater Lebanon, seemingly fulfilling the dreams and aspirations of France's oldest ally in the Levant: the Maronite Church, whose leadership had spared no effort in order to press the cause of an independent, enlarged—and Christian—Lebanese state (González Fernández, 2020: 22-42, 49-63).

Greater Lebanon extended its borders over the formerly semi-autonomous *Mutasarrifiyya Jabal Lubnan*, with its solid Christian majority (Akarli, 1993: 106), and the largely Muslim districts of Rashaya, Hasbaya, Ba'albak and Mu'allaba in the Biqa' Valley, together with the *sanajiq* of Sayda, Beirut and Tripoli up to the Nahr al-Kabir with the *qada'* of 'Akkar (Harris, 2012: 177; Zamir, 2000: 6). The dream of an enlarged Lebanon, extending over its *natural borders* so relentlessly pursued by the Maronite Church since the 1860s had been accomplished, but was the new polity the Maronite nation-state that the hierarchy had been pursuing (Hourani, 1981: 133).

Demography was thus to become one of the most pressing challenges facing the newly established state. By enlarging Mount Lebanon's borders to include areas with Muslim majorities, the proposed Maronite nation-state became, in General Gouraud's words, a "mosaic-like" assembly of confessions and ethnic groups (Hallaq, s.d.: 12-13), a "multicommunal mélange" (Harris, 2012: 179) where Christians were only an exiguous majority and the Maronites, particularly after the wartime famine that wiped up to a third of the Mountain's population (Hakim, 2013: 223-224), represented but a minority among others. Greater Lebanon became more viable from an economic point of view, but

[t]he addition of al-Biqa, the coastal plain and their cities [...] created new problems. The area of the country was almost doubled. Its population, predominantly Christian, was suddenly augmented by half [...], predominantly Shiites and other Moslems [...]. [W]hat the country gained in area it lost in cohesion. (Hitti, 1965: 220).

Confronted with this demographic reality, prominent Maronite notables expressed their opposition to the extended borders of the new state, in the belief that their establishment was a mistake satisfying neither Christians nor Muslims. In Sulayman Kana'an's words:

[...] la création du Grand-Liban sous sa forme actuelle est une fausse opération qui ne satisfait ni ses habitants ni les annexés. Les musulmans annexés considèrent le Liban comme un obstacle à la réalisation de leur idéal [...]. Les Libanais y ont perdu leurs privilèges et leur personnalité. (Cit. in van Leeuw,

2001: 235)

An opinion shared by the prominent intellectual Georges Samné:

[...] où est le foyer chrétien, [...] puisqu'un foyer est un endroit où l'on se groupe en famille ? Qu'est-ce qu'une famille où l'on trouve moitié d'étrangers ? (Cit. in Zamir, 1985: 113).

The concerned voices exposed above reflected a preoccupation widely shared by the French authorities in Lebanon, who did not cease to propose alternative territorial arrangements to the borders drawn in 1920 in order to guarantee a more solid Christian majority in Greater Lebanon. Such proposals, despite their being shared by successive high commissioners and even by the *président du Conseil*, Aristide Briand (Traboulsi, 2007: 86), went unheeded due to the combined opposition of both the Maronite Patriarchate, traumatized by the experience of war and famine, and the Beirut elite, keen on maintaining Tripoli within Lebanon, thus avoiding the rise of an unwanted competitor jeopardizing Beirut's privileged status as the main port on the Levantine coast (Abisaab, 2014: 293, 295-296; Jaulin, 2009: 196).

While all these discussions were taking place, and for a short while, the members of the Christian elite had grouped themselves into a common political platform, the *Parti du Progrès* (aka. *Hizb al-Taraqqi*), whose founding members were a true 'who is who' of Beirut's mercantile aristocracy. The party's platform, while advocating for Lebanese independence and border enlargement, simultaneously demanded the preservation of the French mandate given the country's "exposure to ambitions from without and incursions from within" (van Leeuw, 2001: 241), hence their motto: *Pour le Liban avec la France*. The breakup of the party, for personal—rather than political—causes, given the "absence of profound divergencies" among its members (Kiwani, 1988: 130), would thenceforth divide the Christian political elite into two radically opposed blocs, imposing the need to achieve inter-confessional alliances in order to achieve election to the assemblies which, beginning by the 1922 Representative Council, were successively established by the French authorities. For the following twenty years of the mandate, both the institutional armature set up by the French authorities and the political—and economic—interests of the Lebanese elites would promote the rise of an inter-communal alliance of the financial and mercantile oligarchy of Beirut. With Chiha at the core of this powerful *lobby*, they set out to control Lebanon's destinies and to guarantee that, once independence was achieved, the country remained a safe haven whereupon business could keep on being made.

Biographical Context

Michel Chiha was born on September 2, 1891, in the Mountain village of Bmikkine, 'Alayh District, in a family of distant Iraqi roots. A branch of the family settled in Beirut and the Bika' at the beginning of the nineteenth century and passed on to the Latin Church, while also becoming closely related to another relevant Levantine dynasty, the Greek Catholic

Pharaon (Fara'un) family. Closely linked by marriage, both families enriched themselves during the silk boom of the nineteenth century and invested their gains in the establishment, in 1876, of a "mercantile, industrial, and financial society," which became "the first local society devoted to the financing of the silk economy in what had thitherto been a monopoly of French capital": the *Banque Pharaon-Chiha* (Traboulsi, 1999: 17). The company, while primarily concentrated on the commercialization and production of silk, also participated in a diversified array of activities, from international coal shipping or financial businesses to foreign imports.

It was in this context that Michel Chiha was born and raised. A student of the Jesuits, the early death of his father forced him to abandon his education and to join the family business, becoming the director of the family bank in his early twenties, after a brief stay with his uncle in Manchester, "where he learned English and had the opportunity of reading about commerce and economics" (Traboulsi, 1999: 18). The outbreak of World War I forced him to exile himself in Egypt, whither many Lebanese had fled in fear of conscription. It was, precisely, in the *Bilad al-Nil* that Chiha was to enter in contact with politics for the first time, for he, alongside many other Lebanese exiles, became rapidly affiliated to one of the various different political associations that, established by the numerous and wealthy Lebanese expatriate community, were already active on Egyptian soil.

In the course of his Egyptian exile, Chiha met a young Maronite lawyer from the Mountain, Bishara al-Khuri, with whom he was to share political affiliation, personal friendship and even family bonds, after Khuri's marriage to Chiha's sister, Laure, in 1922 (Khuri, 1960: 116). Partaking in the ideas of the *Union Libanaise*, which called for an independent Greater Lebanon extending itself over its "natural and historical borders" (Traboulsi, 1999: 21), the intimate alliance between both men, between the representative of the City's rising financial oligarchy—what Traboulsi has repeatedly labeled as the 'Consortium'¹—and the son of the plebeian Mountain bureaucracy, risen after the demise of the traditional aristocracy in 1861, was to define the destinies of the Lebanese Republic for decades to come.

On his return from Egypt, Chiha became linked to the *Phoenician* circle commanded by the poet-cum-entrepreneur Charles Corm, whose main mouthpiece would be the quasi-mythical magazine *La Revue Phénicienne* (Salameh, 2015: 48-50). In the course of its brief existence, the journal came to define a certain approach to Lebanese nationalism characterized by its profound Francophilia, its distrust towards Islam, and its attempts at locating the origins of the Lebanese nation in the remote Phoenician past (Hourani, 1962: 320).

For Corm and his Phoenician friends, Lebanon, being "the only Christian country in Asia" (Corm, 1936. Cit. in Tayah, 2003: 55), was not, obviously, a member of a Muslim-

¹Traboulsi (2007: 115-116. Cf. Gendzier, 2006: 55) defined the *Consortium* as the "commercial/financial oligarchy that came to power with independence[. It] was though to comprise some thirty families [holding] monopolistic control over the main axes of the country's economy [...]. In sectarian composition, the families of the oligarchy were mainly Christian: there were 24 Christian families [...] to six Muslim [...]. Christian families practised extended endogamy in order to preserve or increase family wealth and property and advance business partnerships."

dominated Arab or Middle Eastern civilization, but a full participant in a Western world constructed upon a humanism solidly anchored in the principles of the Christian revelation (Tayah, 2003: 55). Such a perspective found, in the *Phoenicians'* opinion, its most polished example in France, the historical friend of the Maronites, whose institutions of higher learning in Lebanon, and especially the *Université Saint-Joseph* (USJ), had contributed to define *une certaine vision du monde* for thousands of young Lebanese Christians (Herzstein, 2009: 149-158).

It was, precisely, in the benches of the USJ that most members of the Phoenician fellowship entered in contact with the early research on Lebanon's past that had been undertaken—unsurprisingly by Frenchmen—all through the nineteenth century. The work of Renan, Bérard, and Lammens, not only rediscovered “the remains of ancient Phoenicia in Lebanon” (Salibi, 1998: 171), but also provided their students with arguments to transcend the parochialism of their pre-existing confessional identities and to root their newly formed national consciousness in a prestigious, if distant, past (Kaufman, 2000: 71; Salibi, 1971: 79-80). This sort of *Phoenicia Resurrecta* was depicted as the true “mother of civilization” (Kaufman, 2001: 181), whose commercial and cultural enterprises had led the way to the beginning of culture in Europe, driving an obvious parallelism with the *Mission Civilisatrice* that was used as one of the main arguments justifying French colonial expansionism.

His participation in Corm's Phoenician circle notwithstanding, Chiha soon came to discard the narrowness of the Phoenician idea for a wider, more pragmatic theory, suited to his own economic interests: Mediterraneanism. The Mediterranean theory defined Lebanon as a “bridge between East and West and between Islam and Christianity” (Zamir, 1985: 125)², as an entity belonging to the “Mediterranean and whose national identity is neither Arab nor Phoenician, but simply Lebanese” (Kaufman, 2000: 296), which allowed the country to remain an open business hub, a kind of traders' island, belonging neither to East nor West, but doing business with both.

It would be, precisely, under the Mediterranean banner that Chiha managed to get elected, in the 1925 Representative Council election, for Beirut's minorities seat. His election coincided with the transformation of the Council into a Constituent Assembly charged with the task of drafting and approving a constitution for Greater Lebanon. Michel Chiha became a member of the drafting committee, and his political philosophy had a profound influence in the construction of the fundamental law (Dib, 2016: 793)—Chiha himself claimed to have “almost entirely drafted” the constitution “by [his] own hand” (*Le Jour*, 06/13/1948. Cf. *Le Jour*, 06/16/1950). Although he has been, furthermore, defined as “the most dominant member of the committee” (Firro, 2004: 19), with a “profound, if not preponderant” role in the drafting process (Rabbath, 1982: 38), there was no agreement as to Chiha's specific role among the surviving members of the committee that were interviewed in 1975 by the Beirut journal *Nahar* (Rabbath,

² Although the civilizational bipartition of the world between a western and an eastern half has come under heavy criticism since the initial publication of Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* in 1978—and even before, the distinction between these symbolic topographies, embodying *a priori* separate existential experiences, and the willingness to connect them under the umbrella of the Lebanese state, represents a central tenet of Chiha's political philosophy, as will be seen below. For a more recent criticism of these notions, vid. Ferri (2021).

1982: 32-38). In fact, recent research has underlined the contribution of other prominent figures (*inter alios* Najib Abu Suwan, Charles Dabbas, or Badr Dimashqiyya) to the construction of the Lebanese constitutional corpus (Dib, 2016: 793). Chiha's direct influence is, however, clearly discernible in the wording of articles 9 and 10 (Traboulsi, 1999: 24), which set up a neutral framework for the relations between the state and the religious communities, whose existence is openly acknowledged even if they are, in the purest Montalembertian fashion, clearly separated from the former.

Despite its having been criticized as being but a carbon copy of the constitutional laws that established the III French Republic, the 1926 constitution—with its immediate amendments of October 1927 and May 1929—reflected the legal traditions bequeathed by Mount Lebanon's long institutional tradition (Chiha, 1942: 66-67; Kedourie, 1992: 51). Parliamentarism, confessionalism, and a strong executive had been the three basic elements characterizing the institutional arrangements of both the *Mutasarrifiyya* and her institutional predecessor, the *Imara*, and they remained as the pillars of the—now renamed—Lebanese Republic. It would be, precisely, under the inspiration of Chiha's ideas that the constitution became interpreted in Hegelian terms, as a flexible and adaptive instrument, reflective of the *spirit of the people*, rather than as a stringent, omnicomprehensive document aiming to organize, up to the minutest detail, the totality of institutional life. Thus conceived, the constitution was capable of integrating within the formalized republican framework it set up the whole universe of changing and evolving traditions that constructed what can be easily termed as the *unwritten constitution of the Mountain* (González Fernández, 2020: 530-580). In Chiha's own words:

« On ne peut faire croître le manguier en Écosse ni l'edelweiss dans le désert. Les plantes ne vivent et ne font de fruits que dans les climats favorables. Ainsi les lois.

C'est un désordre de prétendre transplanter chez les autres au nom du goût (et souvent du plaisir) des mœurs lointaines ; et des codes entiers au nom du savoir et de la félicité ». (Chiha, 1950a: 38-40).

Chiha's job as a legislator, which extended itself beyond the constitutional arena to economic matters, as chairman of the Assembly's Finance Committee, where he defended the *laissez faire* principles that were to become a distinctive trait of his thought, did not enjoy chronological continuity. Preferring to concentrate himself on private activities, Chiha did not seek reelection but kept on playing an active role in politics through his long-standing association with his brother-in-law, Bishara al-Khuri, whose career he supported both financially and, perhaps more importantly, from the pages of the daily *Le Jour*, which he bought in 1934. In a context of growing political polarization between Khuri and Émile Eddé, relentless partisan of a more homogeneous, albeit smaller, Christian Lebanon (Longva, 2015: 62-64; Abisaab, 2014: 67-68, 295-296), whose ideas were supported by the journal *L'Orient*, headed by Georges Naccache and Gabriel Khabbaz, *Le Jour*, without renouncing to serve as an offensive weapon for Khuri's camp, came to expound Chiha's distinctively possibilist approach towards Lebanese statehood, whose main traits will be described hereinbelow.

Chiha's Ideology and the Construction of Lebanese Statehood

Lebanon: A Mediterranean Refuge

It has already been pointed out that, after his juvenile flirtations with Phoenicianism, Michel Chiha came to develop a new approach to Lebanon's identity which emphasized the country's connection to the Mediterranean, presented in quasi-religious terms as "a providential and necessary element in the course of creation" (Chiha, 1950-a: 17). This emphasis on the sea was well suited for a man so representative of the Levantine archipelago of tradesmen and entrepreneurs which had flourished, in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, all over the seaports of the Eastern Mediterranean, and whose business interests could only thrive on open, unhindered commerce (Chiha, 1950-b: 71-72; Mansel, 2011) rather than on the closed borders dreamed by nationalists on both sides of the ideological spectrum.

Chiha's Mediterranean perspective was, however, hardly new in its sources and methods. Like many men of his generation and social class, he was a disciple of the Jesuit priest and scholar Henri Lammens, whose views were heavily indebted to the geographical determinism then *en vogue* in European academia. Following on Lammens' footsteps, Chiha underlined how it was, indeed, geography what constructed the Lebanese exception, by making it, at the same time, a fortress and a crossroads:

« [...] à cause de notre situation dans l'espace, parce qu'aucune puissance dite mondiale ne peut se désintéresser entièrement de nous (en tant que placés en un lieu et sur une route à caractère universel), ensuite parce que nous sommes un pays de montagnes, où l'on peut encore se fortifier et se défendre et enfin parce que nous disposons avec les climats favorables, d'une large façade sur la haute mer, nous sommes devenus, un peu paradoxalement en raison des risques que nous courons, une terre d'asile, le refuge des opprimés et des bannis, avec les conséquences et les charges qu'un privilège tel comporte ». (Chiha, 1942: 10-11).

In this context, it is easily arguable that Chiha was well within the mainstream of Lebanese Christian intelligentsia in claiming an exceptionalist identity for Lebanon that set it apart from its surrounding Middle Eastern hinterland and linked it to Europe and, hence, to modernity (Hojairi, 2011: 256). This bond to the West, this Lebanese singularity, was emphasized not just from a mere geohistorical point of view, but also from an ethnic one, with Chiha presenting Lebanon, in full accordance with other authors like Jean Salem (1968) or even Philip Hitti (1924: 19-21), as a non-Arab—and even non-Semitic—*island at the heart of the Bilad al-Sham*:

« Dira-t-on [...] que le Liban d'aujourd'hui est sémitique ? Le Père Lammens [...] contestait que la Syrie elle-même fut arabe. [...] Nous dirons pour notre part, avec des arguments plus décisifs encore, que *la population du Liban est libanaise, tout simplement* [...]. Tout au plus dirons-nous qu'elle est une variété

méditerranéenne, probablement la moins déchiffrable ». (Chiha, 1942: 44)

The differentiation between Chiha and his coeval theoreticians from the Phoenicianist camp did not, therefore, lie on a radically divergent approach to Lebanese reality, but rather on certain slight nuances—with far-reaching consequences, nonetheless. It is necessary, at this point, to retake the classical Houranian dichotomy between Mountain and City to find how the intellectual followers of Eddé, largely Maronite and of Mountaineer origin, underlined the function of the Mountain, with its essential role in Maronite history, as the fundamental element in the configuration of the Lebanese specificity (Salem, 1968: 87-88; Mouwanes, 1973: 50), while for Chiha, the urban merchant from Beirut, it is the sea, rather than the Mountain—whose influence is, however, explicitly and repeatedly acknowledged as saving Lebanon from the so-called 'defects' of warm countries (Chiha, 1952: 112-114, 131-133, 170-171, 219-221)—which stays at the center of his theoretical approach to Lebanon. In Chiha's thinking, it is the sea (*Le Jour*: 10/24/1944, 10/07/1948) which stands as the avenue for the prosperity of modern Lebanon as a *Merchant Republic* (*Le Jour*: 01/20/1950). It is the sea which serves, moreover, as the door for a "perpetual ferment," for a "perpetual movement" outward (Chiha, 1942: 56)—with emigration presented in eminently positive tones (*Le Jour*: 10/14/1952, 10/29/1953)—as well as inward, the shore being the gate for the permanent wave of influences that allowed him to define Lebanon as an essentially créolized entity, as a miscegenated reality, as a culturally and linguistically cosmopolitan state, as the ultimate embodiment of Levantinism:

« [...] un pays comme le nôtre, s'il n'est pas bilingue (et même trilingue s'il se peut) est tout simplement décapité. En fait, nous maintenons ici, depuis des âges, quantité de langues vivantes et mortes. Qu'aurions-nous à transmettre à l'Orient si nous ne le prenions à l'Occident (l'inverse étant également vrai) [...] si nous ne disposions à côté de la langue arabe, et non moins parfaitement, d'une langue universelle ? » . (Chiha, 1942: 50)

« Le Liban est un pays qui n'est pareil qu'à lui-même [...]. C'est un pays singulier, apparemment seul de son genre et de son espèce. [...] le Liban rapproche et satisfait ce qui partout ailleurs paraîtrait contradictoire et incompatible ; mais s'il assimile assez ce qui vient à lui, il est inassimilable pour ce qui est au-delà de sa frontière naturelle ». (*Le Jour*: 07/09/1949)

Chiha's cosmopolitan perspective did not end, however, with the description of the characteristics of a certain *Liban éternel* but found its way into practical politics. Hence, his personal commitment to Christianity notwithstanding, Greater Lebanon could no longer be, in Chiha's opinion, the "essentially Christian country, destined to govern itself under the perpetual protection of Christian Europe" (Hourani, 1981: 135), so hardly fought for by the Maronite Church throughout history and defended, albeit in modernized terms, by Eddé, Corm, and the Phoenician fellowship, the demographic changes brought about by the enlargement of its borders in 1920 having turned it into a country of "associated communities" (Chiha, 1964: 115). The Lebanon of correlated confessions that Chiha envisaged, that "pluralistic and non-sectarian" state that he conceptualized (Hourani, 1976: 38), had to organize, following the Swiss model he so

warmly cherished (1965: 48-51), upon a kind of corporate federalism where the confessions, as politico-legal entities, would occupy a position akin to that of the territorial cantons in the Helvetian model (*Le Jour*: 07/30/1947).

In openly acknowledging the legitimacy of the confession as a constitutive element in Lebanon's political fabric, instead of trying to forcibly melt those disparate groupings into an obligatory, overarching national identity imposed from the top, the confessional federalism devised by Chiha could only find expression through a representative assembly. Thus, parliament transcends its classical configuration as a democratic instrument or a legislative tool to become a forum for the peaceful encounter of the disparate communities composing the state (*Le Jour*: 07/30/1947); the keystone to a polity conceived, in purely Renanian fashion, as the voluntaristic daily plebiscite of its various segmental groupings:

« [...] la Chambre au Liban est, avant tout, [...] le lieu de rencontre de tous les éléments de ce pays de confessions, et par le fait même un facteur nature d'équilibre et d'union [...] ». (*Le Jour* 01/18/1948).

« [...] au Liban, la Chambre est un organisme indispensable ; c'est la condition du « vouloir vivre en commun » des communautés qui constituent le peuple libanais ; et c'est la garantie de l'avenir ». (*Le Jour* 06/13/1948).

Chiha's possibilist approach to Lebanon mirrored the growing pragmatism of wide sectors of the Sunni élite who, throughout the Mandate, had come to develop an interest in keeping the independence, territorial integrity, and outwardly Western orientation of the nascent Lebanese state (el-Solh, 2004: 45; Firro, 2003: 154). The high-flown calls for Syrian unity, periodically echoed by the successive *Coastal Conferences* that took place between 1923 and 1936, were rebuffed, first and foremost, by Kazim al-Sulh, cousin of Riyad al-Sulh, prominent member of the unionist camp and future Prime Minister of independent Lebanon. In an article published in various journalistic outlets shortly after the second, and most important, of those conferences, which had taken place on March 10, 1936, Sulh charged against the "majority of the congressmen [whom he] accused [...] of ignoring the new realities in the country" (Traboulsi, 2007: 99) while calling for an open approach to Lebanon, whereby Christians could be gained for the Arabist cause by "emphasizing the non-sectarian nature of Arab nationalism" (el-Solh, 2004: 31). Moreover, he argued, detaching the Muslim-majority regions annexed to Lebanon back in 1920, as had been proposed during the Conference, would only serve to "transform the [ensuing] country into an irredentist Christian entity closely linked to France—a Malta or a Gibraltar in the heart of the Arab world" (Zamir, 2000: 192). Sulh's views came to be supported by the prominent Arab nationalist 'Adil Arslan, who declared that "to separate from Lebanon its mainly Muslim districts [...] would equal to depriving it from all its Arab identity and to render it exclusively Maronite" (Firro, 2003: 149).

The fact that, by October 1936, both Riyad al-Sulh and Salam 'Ali Salam, two veteran partisans of Syrian unity, had evolved towards a more conciliatory position, reveals how the community of interests between the Sunni and Christian bourgeoisies had led politicians on both sides of the confessional divide to work together towards achieving

a sovereign, pluralistic, liberal-capitalistic Lebanon with a decidedly Western orientation, but open to the Arab world and serving as its *entrepôt par excellence* (Gendzier, 2006: 50-51).

In this context of growing ideological *rapprochement* between both bourgeoisies, the National Pact, usually portrayed as the *gentlemen's agreement* that allowed Lebanon's independence and configured its peculiar system of governance, goes beyond any specific formula or definition and can be considered as the ultimate *Chihaist* document. A mere agreement not to agree, a Lebanese approach to *Realpolitik* (Khazen, 1991: 5), a pragmatic tool for institutional adaptation (Khalaf, 1968: 260), the National Pact, lying upon cosmopolitanism, openness and *laissez-faire* rather than on any predetermined concept of nationalism was, essentially, the non-national pact of the élites meeting in the marketplace, whereby all—the old aristocracy and the new oligarchy of both religious persuasions and sharing a *habitus* in the Bourdieuan sense (1990 [1980]: 59-60; 1979: 437)—came to establish Lebanon as a nationally neutral bulwark centered on economic and personal freedoms rather than the *bleak actualities* of blood, faith, and kin. As Chiha himself did not fail to realize, the National Pact was but a *modus operandi* (Khalaf, 1968: 243-269), an explicit way to invoke the pluralistic principles enshrined in Lebanon's constitutional traditions, a mechanism to re-interpret and adapt the formal Constitution and the *raison d'état* to the diversity of Lebanon's demographic patchwork and to the changing circumstances of a permanently agitated Middle East. He wrote:

« [...] il faut prendre cette décision nécessaire de se soumettre aux charges que la vie en société nous impose ; et en même temps, d'apprendre à tenir compte des particularités libanaises de cette vie en société : diversité extrême des milieux, des mœurs, des besoins, évidences qui interdisent qu'on mette les gens rigoureusement en série.

Le Liban est un des pays les plus disparates de la terre. [...] Statuts personnels, idées, mœurs, façons distinctes de penser et de vivre, coutumes différentes ou contradictoires [...].

C'est une moyenne qu'il faut chercher, une moyenne acceptable pour tous [...].

Que ceux qui ne veulent pas comprendre combien il est difficile que ce pays croisse et se consolide sans mille tolérances quotidiennes renoncent au moins à philosopher dans le vide ! » (*Le Jour*: 01/03/1945).

Lebanese politics became thus founded upon its endogenous traditions rather than on imported ideologies, unsuited to the Lebanese situation (Chiha, 1950-a: 220-222; Harik, 1972: 315-316; Hurewitz, 1966: 224). Consensus, restraint, prudence, and the legitimacy of parapolitical groupings—confessions, interest groups, clientèles—laid the bases of a political system which, much to Chiha's liking, rejected radicalism, absolutism, and unipersonal power and allowed for the coexistence of traditional loyalties alongside secular, democratic institutions (Chiha, 1950-a: 189-191), thereby leading the way to a specifically Lebanese approach to modernity.

Laissez-Faire: An Economic Imperative

The open society that Chiha conceptualized in the political arena found a clear translation in a *laissez-faire* economic outlook which constitutes, as has been repeatedly affirmed throughout this paper, the spine of his entire thought. The geographic imperative which had built the Lebanese demographic exceptionalism was again present in Chiha's writing to justify Lebanon's role as an "entrepôt where all kinds of monetary dealings [could] take place" (Samara, 1971: 38), as the middleman between Europe and the Arab world, a kind of *Phaenicia rediviva*. Deepening in the Swiss comparison he was so fond of and extending it to Belgium, Chiha affirmed:

« [...] le cas belge et le cas Suisse se présentent à nous comme des témoignages et comme des exemples. [...] les forces profondes de la Belgique et de la Suisse sont du même type que les nôtres : ce sont, sur un territoire bien défini par la nature où des façons de penser très diverses se sont groupés, la tolérance et la liberté.

Ce que la Suisse et la Belgique sont pour l'Europe, nous le sommes [...] pour le Proche-Orient [...].

Comme les Suisses, nous avons les montagnes et, comme les Belges, nous avons la mer. Et, comme eux, nous avons besoin pour vivre de trouver devant nous un monde, pareillement à nous, accueillant et ouvert ». (Chiha, 1965: 49-50).

Beyond his philosophical justifications for an economically liberal orientation for his country, Chiha's own financial interests were handsomely served by Lebanon's consecration to Smithian liberalism. A banker, it must be repeated, one of the few indigenous Lebanese sitting at the board of the foreign concessionary companies controlling the Lebanese public utilities, Chiha was not only a member of the *Consortium*, but stood at its very core, at the very center of the élite alliance that had brought forth independence and the National Pact.

Once independence was achieved, Chiha, having become the regime's *éminence grise*, in Traboulsi's fortunate expression (1999: 28), pressed for the adoption of free trade and low taxes as the fundamental criteria guiding the young Republic's economic policy. A deliberate choice, institutionalized in November 1948, *laissez-faire* was embraced with gusto. It did not, however, receive its definitive boost until the breakup of the customs union with Syria on March 13, 1950. By then, the system had already reaped a generous harvest of passionate partisans having in Michel Chiha the committed apostle who, in defending the virtues of liberalism as Lebanon's natural choice, did not hesitate to qualify as 'foolish' the attempts at protectionism by then undertaken not just in the Middle East—with Syria, Israel, and Egypt embarking, with various degrees of success, in different attempts at socializing policies (Sherbiny & Hatem, 2015: 69-78; Álvarez-Ossorio, 2010: 89-91; Ginat, 1997: 7-46)—but also in a post-war Europe where *dirigisme* appeared as the new economic fashion:

« C'est de la présence du Liban à l'étranger [...] que ce pays [...] tire de vastes

moyens d'existence. C'est de ce mouvement inlassable, de ce mouvement à distance, de cette souple intelligence, de cette agilité de l'esprit, de cette aptitude au voyage, de cette promptitude dans le déplacement [...].

C'est folie de prétendre enfermer ce pays et ce peuple dans le mur, branlants d'ailleurs, de l'économie à la mode. Les Libanais les plus doués, les Libanais les plus entreprenants, gagnent leur vie loin de leur sol ou par des services [...]. La sagesse est de respecter et de faciliter le mode d'existence qui leur a donné leur rang et leur prestige dans le commerce intercontinental ». (*Le Jour*: 10/29/1953)

Against the perceived threat of socialism and interventionism, which he qualified as an "aberrant economic [policy] driving mankind to slavery" (Chiha, 1950-b: 69), Chiha insisted on the important role played by freedom as the fundamental ingredient in the buildup of the Lebanese being, as an essential element for Lebanon's very existence and a prerequisite for the safeguard of the basic guidelines of its political and institutional structure. In conclusion, Chiha portrayed unrestricted economic freedom as a direct consequence of the country's *national spirit* rather than the mere preference of a commercial élite (*Le Jour*: 12/11/1946).

Chiha's unyielding commitment to economic liberalism was, certainly, modulated by his deep Christian faith, which led him not only to defend a certain primacy of the spiritual over the material (*Le Jour*: 03/30/1945, 05/06/1953, 05/17/1953), but also, and most importantly, to reinterpret *laissez-faire* as an overarching ethic of being. His economic preferences are, thus, presented as the natural and morally correct framework for human experience, contrasting sharply with the "chains" imposed by the state (Chiha, 1950-a: 210), whose legislative hypertrophy had become, in his own words, "*tout à fait effrayante*" (1950-a: 220).

The writings of his later years reveal, however, a growing preoccupation with the defense of liberty, as a concept, and of liberalism, as an economic system. It is not hard to deduce the parallel phenomena that justified Chiha's growing economic concerns: first of all, the rise of Soviet influence in the Near East after the end of World War II and, secondly, the downfall, after their defeat in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, of the conservative, bourgeois Arab élites that had led the states of the *Mashriq* to independence, to be substituted by a new generation of populist, lower-middle-class-men, like Nasser, with a strong commitment to socializing economic practices, and whose claim to power was not based on any kind of legal-institutional bond, but on an intimate connection to the people, charismatic in nature (Chaitani, 2007: 129; Khalaf, 2002: 107; Ashton, 1996: 26).

Therefore, and within this context of a growing *revolt of the masses* (Ortega y Gasset, 2014), where he did not fail to perceive Moscow's shadow (*Le Jour*: 12/29/1951, 01/23/1952, 01/21/1953), Chiha stepped up his criticism against "integral Marxism," whose materialism is, he said, "jointly rejected" by Christianity and Islam (Chiha, 1952: 181), and gives way to an "inhuman society" (*Le Jour*: 07/19/1949), while translating into an aggressive and tentacular foreign policy which he presented as invasive and conquering (*Le Jour*: 01/17/1953, 03/11/1953, 11/19/1954). More generally, Chiha came to redouble his doctrinal efforts against interventionism, affirming, in the midst of the

crisis that brought about the demise of the Syro-Lebanese Customs Union,³ that “it is no longer possible to live behind walls and in solitude” (*Le Jour*: 03/11/1950) while openly comparing the Syrian attempts at protectionism, which he qualified as “suicidal” and “regressive” (*Le Jour*: 03/09/1950, 03/29/1950), with the openness of a Lebanon whose “entire economic policies must be oriented towards freedom [and] quality” (*Le Jour*: 03/14/1950). It comes, therefore, as no surprise that he exulted rather brazenly, in tune with the state of mind of most Christian Lebanese circles (Chaitani, 2007: 98, 105), at the Union’s breakdown:

« L’évolution de la situation économique depuis la rupture de l’union douanière est, dans son ensemble, nettement favorable au Liban. Cette rupture que nous n’avons point voulue, que nous n’avons point cherchée, se traduit par des avantages certains ». (*Le Jour*: 05/12/1950)

The Chiha of the late 1940s and early 1950s not only was reinforcing his *laissez-faire* leanings but was also growing increasingly wary of the Arab state system established by the Cairo Agreement (March 22, 1945). Despite the successful efforts undertaken by his close friend and relative Henri Pharaon, as Foreign Minister in ‘Abd al-Hamid Karami’s Cabinet (January 7-August 16, 1945), to tone down the wording of the Protocol of Alexandria,⁴ whose provisions had been believed by large sectors of Christian opinion to jeopardize Lebanese sovereignty (Chaitani, 2007: 25; Traboulsi, 2007: 111-112; Ammoun, 2004: 61-62), Chiha would consecrate a large part of his later editorials to advocate for the establishment of a pan-Mediterranean defense pact (*Le Jour*: i.a. 06/04/1953, 01/13/1953, 08/06/1952, 12/29/1951), which, overlapping any kind of preexisting pan-Arab commitment, would formally bind, “from Cairo to Athens and from Ankara to Madrid” (*Le Jour*: 03/19/1952) the Mediterranean basin to the Atlantic Alliance. Deploing the “bizarre [and] irrational” (*Le Jour*: 11/11/1954) *Asiatic* policy followed by the Arab governments (*Le Jour*: 10/27/1954), Chiha’s Mediterranean alliance, in firmly aligning Lebanon and the rest of the Near East to the Western camp in the Cold War, would—he hoped—deflect the danger of Soviet encroachment over the area once and for all. As he bluntly said:

« Une chose est exclue désormais : c’est la neutralité du monde arabe. On ne neutralise pas la principale route maritime et aérienne de la planète. On ne neutralise pas le centre de gravité de l’ancien Monde ». (*Le Jour*: 05/06/1953)

³ After the independence of Syria and Lebanon, the services that had been jointly provided to both mandated territories by the French authorities—known as the *Intérêts Communs* and including a wide array of public utilities—were grouped under a common framework and managed mutually by both states. The divergent economic policies followed by the Syrian and Lebanese governments in the post-independence era led to numerous conflicts between both sides and to the eventual dissolution of the union, unilaterally decided by Syria on March 13, 1950 (vid. Chaitani, 2007; Traboulsi, 2007: 121, 123; Ammoun, 2004: 19, 25).

⁴ Concluded on October 7, 1944, the Protocol of Alexandria was the preliminary document outlining the framework for cooperation among the Arab States. It would be superseded by the Charter of the Arab League (March 22, 1945), solemnly signed in the aftermath of the Cairo Conference, where the Lebanese and Saudi delegations managed to tone down most of the Alexandrian provisions in order to guarantee the full sovereignty of each member state and prevent the League from becoming a supra-national structure endowed with a quasi-federal nature (González Fernández, 2018: 233-235).

'Chihaist' Thought in Contemporary Lebanon

In 1989, sixty-two of the surviving members of the 1972 parliament were assembled in the Saudi mountain resort of Ta'if and, after much cajoling by the Arab League and other international patrons, produced the agreement that was to put an end to the war in Lebanon. While Ta'if redistributed power within the participants in the political equation, going as far as to a certain 'parliamentarization' of the Lebanese system that stood in stark contrast to the presidential dominance that had characterized its First Republic⁵, it did not "alter significantly the consensual basis of the Lebanese consensual compact (González Fernández, 2022: 8. Cf. Hudson, 1999: 27-40). On the contrary, Ta'if consolidated the operational features of the National Pact, "confirm[ing] several consuetudinary practices that had long ago become part and parcel of Lebanon's constitutional tradition" (González Fernández, 2022: 8). Thus, beyond the realignment of sectarian quotas or the establishment of a Constitutional Council entrusted with constitutional review on the concentrated model characteristic of European constitutionalism (Gannagé, 2015: 2; Kelsen, 1928: 30-84), Ta'if reaffirmed the power-sharing, flexible, *Chihaist* understanding of constitutional legality and political practice that had characterized Lebanon since its independence. In fact, these principles have been incorporated into the jurisprudence of the council, which has "explicitly validated the constitutional role of Lebanese tradition in its interpretation of textual legality" (González Fernández, 2022: 8. Cf. Blouet, 2020: 1.006-1.008), asserting an understanding of constitutional practice that acknowledges the legitimacy of para-legal practices and social groupings.

While the Syrian occupation rendered moot the democratic principles enshrined by the Lebanese constitution (Harris, 2012: 258-269; Salem: 1997, 26-29) and political tradition, they were rekindled by the 2008 Doha Agreement. Conceived to put an end to the political maelstrom enveloping Lebanon since the so-called Cedar Revolution, Doha and the subsequent Ba'abda Declaration (June 2012) reconfirmed the basic principles of the National Pact as Lebanon's immanent constitution, enshrining the "agreement to disagree" (González Fernández, 2022: 9), the *mille tolérances* Chiha had written about, as the basic foundation of the country's politico-constitutional system. While the explicit formalization of such essential principles of the Lebanese constitutional compact as the 'blocking third' turns the country's political system into a complex and conflictual mechanism (Shehadi, 2020), something that Chiha had not failed to foresee (*Le Jour*, 04/13/1948), such guarantees appear as an inevitability in the fragmented Lebanese context. As President Michel Sulayman shrewdly observed, Lebanon "is ruled by the logic of consensus," which logically implies that "it is impossible for a confessional or sectarian group to prevail over another" (Cit. in Wählich, 2017: 10). The primacy of representativeness over efficiency thus emerges as the inevitable toll that the Lebanese system has to pay to prevent "disorder and secret or avowed separatisms" (*Le Jour*, 03/17/1953; Chiha, 1964b: 44-47).

The implicit absorption of Chihaist notions within the Lebanese constitutional system

⁵ A thorough analysis of the legal and constitutional consequences of Ta'if can be consulted in Azhari (2016: 254-259).

permits to classify it as a *structural constitution* in the sense given by Giorgio Lombardi (2019: LI-L-III). Against the *superstructural constitutions*, which are defined by repeated “ruptures of the political order [and] successive constructions of new balances” (Lombardi, 2019: LI-LII), the Lebanese constitutional compact has managed, despite the many—often bloody—crises experienced by the country, “to remain in time, accompanying the political evolution of [its] people, and adapting its principles with regard to societal changes” (Lombardi, 2019: LI). This evolution, as happened with the 1976 Constitutional Document, the Ta’if Agreement, or the Doha Agreement, may transform the peculiarities of the political system, and the terms of the power-sharing equation, but leaves unscathed the essential principles whereupon the constitutional edifice is constructed. As Kamal Salibi does not fail to explain (2011: 180), this *structural* nature of the Lebanese constitution was largely due to Chiha’s efforts:

“[...] he had personally seen to it that [the] Constitution did not rule on every detail of the political structure of the republic, leaving the way open for periodical readjustments that would result from give and take among the republic’s different confessional groups and political clans”.

Faulty as the Lebanese system presently appears, its very resilience in the midst of its economic and strategic plight (González Fernández, 2022: 1-17) is largely due to the tacit, almost discreet, incorporation of the constitutional principles devised by Michel Chiha, who was, in turn, indebted to a long tradition in Lebanese constitutionalism harking back, at least, to the 1861 *Règlement Organique* (González Fernández, 2018: 679-739).

Conclusion

Chiha’s death, in December 1954, at the summit of his intellectual production, prevented him from witnessing the crises that the Lebanon he had contributed to build was to face in 1958, 1969, and, with terrible consequences, from 1975 onward. It is permissible to venture, though, that he would have congratulated himself on how the National Pact, as Lebanon’s *Unwritten Constitution* in action, enabled middle-of-the-road solutions for both the mini-civil war of 1958, and for the 1969 Lebanese-Palestinian showdown. It could, furthermore, be argued that Chiha would not have been excessively surprised by the repeated crises that threatened to destroy Lebanon during its First Republic (1943-1975). After all, he had always realized that his country was, as a consequence of its geostrategical position, condemned to live dangerously:

« Politiquement, le Proche-Orient est décidément un des endroits les moins confortables du monde [...]. Nous sommes compris dans cet espace « vital » des empires et de l’univers. Nous sommes même [...] au point le plus accessible et le plus sensible de cette zone illustre [...]. (Chiha, 1973: 21-22).

[...] Certains pays sont condamnés à vivre dangereusement. Ils n’y peuvent rien. Les ambitions et les querelles les trouvent sur leur passage ». (Chiha, 1964: 132)

It is, therefore, evident that Chiha was fully aware of the risks faced by the *Merchant Republic* he devised in his writings: the small 'Switzerland of the Middle East,' living side by side with bellicose and power-hungry neighbors was a political and economic oddity in a region where authoritarian and ethnicist polities, accompanied by various attempts at socialism, contrasted rather sharply with Lebanon's free-wheeling society, open economy, and rebellious press. This awareness did not prevent him from consistently pressing for the consolidation of a political system with an undeniable Anglo-Saxon flavor, based as it was on an unwritten set of élite arrangements rather than on the formalized, *Kelsenian* adherence to written law typical of Continental constitutionalism. A system constructed upon political—and not only economic—*laissez-faire*, which did not force its citizens to conform to a state-imposed *national* identity but only demanded passive allegiance to its institutions while openly accepting the pre-existing segmental cleavages that pervaded its society.

In this context, the personal federalism promoted by Chiha and developed by the Lebanese state between 1943 and 1975 stood out as an a-national oddity in a post-war world shaken by national liberation movements all across Asia and Africa, and can be properly understood as a prefiguration of Habermas's notions of constitutional patriotism and Juan Linz's state-nation model⁶ (Stepan et al., 2011; Müller, 2007), insofar as it developed as a disparate association of diverging demographic groups bound together by a generally-accepted common legislation. In fact, it could even be argued that the *Chihaist* approach to Lebanese statehood offers a workable synthesis between both concepts, for it does not construct a mere "*postnational* form of political identification and attachment" (Cronin, 2003: 3) hoping to overcome the prepolitical bonds of nationalism—or identity, more general—but rather a *non-national* understanding of Lebanon, which incorporates a legislative superstructure (the 1926 constitution and the normative corpus derived therefrom) upon the effectively existing segmentations of society (confessions, but also tribes, clientèles, and kinship groups). Thus, *Chihaist* Lebanon did not demand an abstract attachment to a legislation—a criticism frequently levelled against the Habermasian idea of constitutional patriotism (Honig, 2009: 31-35; Canovan, 2000: 413-432)—but, rather, incorporated and legitimized a whole array of parapolitical attachments within the formalized political structure defined by that legislation. The system thus devised succeeded politically, for it did manage to promote inter-confessional cooperation and helped to define an overarching Lebanese identity (Boustani, 2020: 415-421), but it also—and perhaps more importantly—succeeded economically so that, by 1975, Lebanon was not only more

⁶ The state-nation paradigm, initially formulated by Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan in 1996, attempts to understand the comparative success achieved by certain socially segmented societies despite their lack of congruence between the "political boundaries of the state" and those of their sociocultural groupings (Stepan et al., 2011: 4). State-nations, they explain, "stand for a political-institutional approach that respects and protects *multiple but complementary* [...] identities" (Stepan et al., 2011: 4) and recognize the legitimacy of existing societal cleavages, while simultaneously fostering attachment to the existing state through a series of policies (federalism, consociationalism) that uphold and respect those very identities. The state-nation idea, therefore, permits the accommodation of more than one "politically salient culture" but, at the same time, demands "respect for the common institutions of the state and for existing sociocultural diversities" (Stepan et al., 2011: 6-7). For the authors, the 'state-nation' stands at the middle of the road between the mono-identitarian nation-state and the 'pure multinationalism' characterizing those polities whose variegated segments reject living together under the same state and "commit themselves to a nation-building project" of their own (Stepan et al., 2011: 11).

prosperous, but it was also less unequal (Khalaf, 2002: 159-169; Khazen, 2000: 29-73). Paradoxically enough, *laissez-faire* Lebanon, with its open borders, its service-oriented economy, and its unbridled commercial competition was further from being an Ayn Rand-type anarcho-liberal dystopia than any of its interventionist neighbors.

The fact that the Lebanese system ended up collapsing into a protracted and destructive civil war (1975-1990) does not detract from the validity of these conclusions. Without denying that the Lebanon of 1975 suffered important internal problems, it is indisputable that foreign interference, with Lebanon becoming the predilect arena for regional powers to play their game of power politics, overwhelmed Lebanon's limited capabilities and undermined the basis of the National Pact by tearing apart the delicate fabric of legitimacy and political traditions that the Lebanese élites had been carefully spinning for over three decades (González Fernández, 2015, 2020). The fact that post-war Lebanon, particularly after the 2005 Syrian withdrawal and the 2008 Doha Agreement, has returned to a consensual system of governance, based on implicit rules, consensual coalitions, and unwritten agreements bears witness to the resilience of the *Nizam al-Mithaq al-Watani* and to Michel Chiha's foresight.

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