

Michel Chiha
By Chris Doyle

Lebanon has produced some of the greatest of the Arab's world's visionaries and thinkers, but none more so than Michel Chiha. A drafter of its constitution, a politician and a journalist, he was his country's intellectual conscience, and it was he who first saw Lebanon as a refuge for minorities. Chiha belongs to those Arabs whose thoughts, ideas and visions should have been top-table reading for the policy makers of the West who largely sees the Arab world as an intellectual vacuum, full of backward and defeated peoples. Yet in the English-speaking world he remains a relative unknown, with too few of his writings translated for broader examination. This valuable collection of his writings is an important step to address that.

If he were with us today, Chiha's thoughts would have been fascinating, but would they have found a hearing outside his Levantine world, or would they still be cast aside as they were half a century ago? Arab thought is still more derided than espoused. As Chiha warned so prophetically about the dangers of partitioning Palestine, so too his successors railed against the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Similar lessons can be drawn from both.

It is always a tough decision to opt for a reprint. Surely a work must be out of date, irrelevant, surpassed by more recent tomes? But the works of great visionary thinkers do stand the test of time - the lessons and ideas outlined are still relevant decades later.

This work is a collection of Chiha's thoughts on Palestine penned in the latter years of his life between 1946 and 1954. It chronicles the frustration at what he witnessed not least from the nascent post-war international community and an Arab League that appears as impotent then as it remains today. More importantly this stands as record of his vision of what was to follow.

From the start, Chiha was clear that partition of Palestine would not only engulf the region but effect the West as well. It would, he believed, be a disaster not only for his beloved Lebanon but for the Jewish people too for whom he shows no malice. Indeed he yearns for a single state where Arab and Jew can build a shared future and "develop their country together." But if there were to be mass Jewish immigration he wonders how these peoples could all be squashed into Palestine "like sardines in a tin." Anyone who still falls for the widely propagated Israeli myth that Jerusalem only started to become an issue for the Arabs in the post 1967 era should read *Chiha's cri de coeur* about the fate of the holy city. He even urges Jordan to move its capital to Jerusalem to echo the Israeli move. He envisages Israel becoming a "fortress" in what would become a "hundred year's war". Sixty years on such sombre predictions do not look so bizarre. His solutions still seem prescient, not least his call for an international buffer force to separate Arabs and Jews, something that many people consider necessary now.

For Chiha, a conflict that many, largely the apologists for Israeli actions, seek to overcomplicate retains its original simplicity. The Arabs had been forced to create space for Israel owing to their ineptitude. The US and others had given the Zionists

the freedom not only to colonise Arab land but to expand and exert their power over the region. There are also clear messages to the Arab side that they would be best served by “pointing to the possibility rather than the impossibility of peace”.