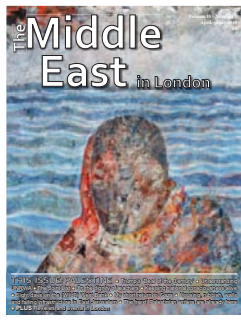


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The Middle East in London

THIS ISSUE: PALESTINE • Trump's 'Deal of the Century' • Understanding UNRWA • The Joint List • On the dignity of teachers • Keeping national consciousness alive • Eight days on the (Wild?) West Bank • My short return to Gaza • Housing, rubbish, walls and failing infrastructure in East Jerusalem • The 'next' Palestinian writers are already here • **PLUS** Reviews and events in London



Tayseer Barakat, *Arrival*, 2018.
Acrylic on canvas, 47 x 41cm.
Courtesy of Zawyeh Gallery
and the artist

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The Middle East in London

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EVENTS IN LONDON

In Search of A Prophet: A Spiritual Journey with Khalil Gibran

By Paul-Gordon Chandler

Rowman and Littlefield, 2017, £13.95

Reviewed by Atef Alshaer

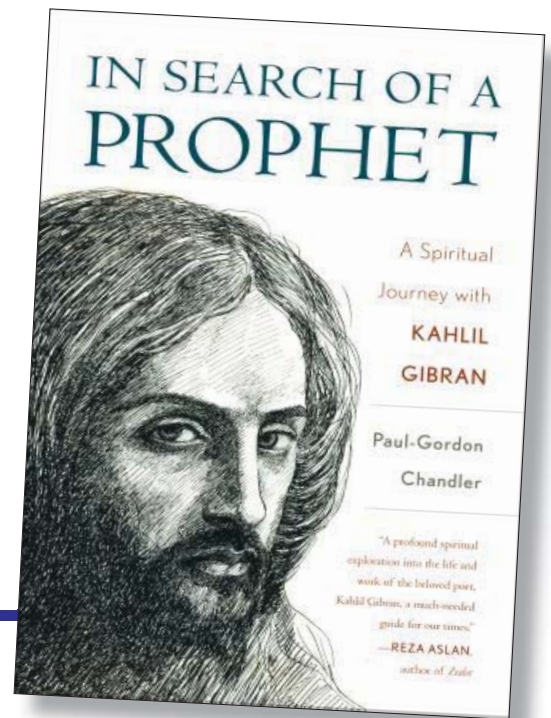
In *In Search of A Prophet: A Spiritual Journey with Khalil Gibran* by Paul-Gordon Chandler is a brilliant companion to a truly insightful and an ever-relevant poet who left indelible marks on Middle Eastern as well as Western cultures. Chandler traces his growing fascination with Gibran, highlighting how he too lived between different cultures, Muslim and Christian, and ultimately found in Gibran a healing voice. Summing up Gibran's legacy, Chandler writes, 'Khalil wrote for both the East and the West, presenting a nonsectarian vision of our world and offering his readers a spiritual tapestry that transcends humanity's divisions' (p. 2). Indeed, it is this 'spiritual tapestry' that Chandler unearths in this book, pursuing Gibran's soulful journey from his origins in Lebanon to his family's migration to the United States at the turn of the 20th century to his sojourn in Paris and finally to his resting place back in Bsharri in Lebanon, where Gibran was born in 1883.

Unlike other books which tend to record Gibran's enigmatic life in great detail, this book is a quiet voyage into Gibran's mind and soul as they form a coherent and meaningful vision of life amidst turmoil and instability. It is an extraordinary contribution, depicting Gibran as a unique figure who, through his life and writing, projected an exquisite picture of humanity transcending divisions and seeking a path of inner peace and coexistence. What makes this book exceptionally interesting is that its prose is anchored in Gibran's writing,

echoing its lasting resonance. Gibran's vision was influenced by his childhood in Lebanon within the context of the increasingly despotic Ottoman Empire and the communities he lived within. Much of his writing is infused with biblical imagery, but it developed to accommodate other texts and experiences, including from the Islamic tradition, to the extent that his most famous book, *The Prophet* creatively invokes the journey of Prophet Mohammad. Indeed, Gibran is a holistic figure, as it were, constantly learning and absorbing influences and integrating them into his unique and inimitable style that speaks to the heart, soul and mind, all in the same breath.

With provocative titles, such as *Khalil the Heretic* or *Spirits Rebellious* or *Jesus The Son of Man*, Gibran sought to awaken people from their strict adherence to religious dogma and structured ideologies which were seen as corrupting, evincing walls among people rather than freeing them and bringing them together on a humane and spiritual basis. As Chandler wrote, 'Khalil instead chose to focus on "awakening" people to their greater self and to the true heart of God' (p.34). Perhaps Gibran's lifelong mission was to find unity that explains all the mysteries of life.

In the *Madman*, Gibran pays homage to the eccentric artists and writers who influenced him, including William Blake, Nietzsche, William Yeats and others. The artist appears as one who feels his senses and their afflictions. Madness is a form of



'divine sublimation'. The book is invitation to 'harmony, contemplation and spirituality'. Chandler's journey with Gibran continues to reveal the sources of inspiration to his other great writings, such as *The Tempest* and *The Prophet*, and it is the latter book which attracted worldwide attention and became an essential classic. It speaks to essential themes: love, friendship, marriage, children, crime and death, and each of these themes is discussed in such a way as to embrace humanity to its fullest. The overarching, recurrent concern in Gibran's writing is for unity and purpose in life: 'would that I could be the peacemaker in your soul, that I might turn the discord and the rivalry of your elements into oneness and melody' (p. 89).

Chandler clearly identifies with Gibran's life and vision, reminding us of the concurrence of his life and vision with him. To this end, the book is an exquisite homage to Gibran, but it is also a moving reflection on Chandler's outlook on life as holistic, deeply spiritual and ultimately embracing of all humanity – notwithstanding its manufactured divisions – as of one family.

Atef Alshaer is a Lecturer in Arabic and Cultural Studies at the University of Westminster. He has written several research papers and monographs, including Poetry and Politics in the Modern Arab World. He is also the Editor of A Map of Absence: An Anthology of Palestinian Writing on the Nakba (forthcoming by Dar Saqi, May 2019)