



# *H*istories of the Modern Middle East **NEW DIRECTIONS**

edited by **ISRAEL GERSHONI,**  
**HAKAN ERDEM & URSULA WOKÖCK**

# Histories of the Modern Middle East

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## NEW DIRECTIONS

EDITED BY  
Israel Gershoni  
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# TABLES AND FIGURES

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## Table

2.1	The Silver Kuruş and Its Exchange Rate, 1780–1914	25
-----	---	----

## Figures

5.1	“A Girl Playing a Guitar,” by Abdū ’I-Qāsim, 1816	80
5.2	“Embracing Lovers,” attributed to Muhammad Sadiq, Shiraz, c. 1770–1780	82
5.3	“A Girl in Outdoor Costume Holding an Apple,” period of Fath ‘Ali Shah	87
14.1	“President Roosevelt announced that every family would get a respectable home after the war”	250
14.2	Ibn al-Balad: “The tram is more expensive; food is more expensive; fabric is more expensive. But I’m the same as I was!”	251
14.3	Siamese Twins	252
14.4	Hoda Sultan	255
14.5	Advertisement for <i>Boss Hasan</i> (1952)	257
14.6	Photograph from a news item listing films playing in local theaters	258
14.7	Advertisement for <i>Hamido</i> (1953)	259
14.8	Sultan and Shauqi reverse roles	262
14.9	Advertisement for <i>Port Said</i> (1957)	264
14.10	Publicity still from <i>Port Said</i> (1957)	265
14.11	Shauqi in blackface as the mythic hero ‘Antar Ibn Shaddad	267

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—*Israel Gershoni*

—*Hakan Erdem*

—*Ursula Woköck*

# CONTENTS

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<i>List of Tables and Figures</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix

1 Doing History: Modern Middle Eastern Studies Today, <i>Israel Gershoni and Ursula Woköck</i>	1
---	---

## Part 1 New Dimensions of Modernizing Processes

2 The Great Ottoman Debasement, 1808–1844: A Political Economy Framework, <i>Şevket Pamuk</i>	21
3 A Prelude to Ottoman Reform: Ibn ‘Ābidīn on Custom and Legal Change, <i>Wael B. Hallaq</i>	37
4 The Damascus Affair and the Beginnings of France’s Empire in the Middle East, <i>Mary C. Wilson</i>	63
5 The Gender of Modernity: Reflections from Iranian Historiography, <i>Afsaneh Najmabadi</i>	75

## Part 2 Globalization Then and Now

6 From Liberalism to Liberal Imperialism: Lord Cromer and the First Wave of Globalization in Egypt, <i>Roger Owen</i>	95
7 Late Capitalism and the Reformation of the Working Classes in the Middle East, <i>Joel Beinin</i>	113

## Part 3 Recovering Lost Voices in the Age of Colonialism

8 Exploring the Field: Lost Voices and Emerging Practices in Egypt, 1882–1914, <i>Zachary Lockman</i>	137
--	-----

9	Slaves or Siblings? Abdallah al-Nadim's Dialogues About the Family, <i>Eve M. Troutt Powell</i>	155
10	Shaikh al-Ra'is and Sultan Abdülhamid II: The Iranian Dimension of Pan-Islam, <i>Juan R. I. Cole</i>	167

#### Part 4 Constructing Identities, Defining Nations

11	Recruitment for the "Victorious Soldiers of Muhammad" in the Arab Provinces, 1826–1828, <i>Hakan Erdem</i>	189
12	The Politics of History and Memory: A Multidimensional Analysis of the Lausanne Peace Conference, 1922–1923, <i>Fatma Müge Göçek</i>	207
13	Arab Society in Mandatory Palestine: The Half-Full Glass? <i>Rashid Khalidi</i>	229
14	Manly Men on a National Stage (and the Women Who Make Them Stars), <i>Walter Armbrust</i>	247

#### Part 5 Conclusion

15	The Return of the Concrete? <i>Israel Gershoni and Ursula Woköck</i>	279
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	<i>Glossary</i>	287
	<i>Bibliography</i>	289
	<i>The Contributors</i>	311
	<i>Index</i>	315
	<i>About the Book</i>	325



# Doing History: Modern Middle Eastern Studies Today

*Israel Gershoni & Ursula Woköck*

## Broad Perspectives

Middle Eastern studies, as any academic profession, from time to time needs to re-examine the nature of its discipline and vocation. Since the 1970s, some substantial developments have occurred in the field, in particular the expansion of the scope of inquiry into new areas, an openness to interdisciplinary endeavors, and the digestion of new methods and paradigms suggested by the humanities in general. Still, it is crucial for scholars working on the Middle East—historians, sociologists, and anthropologists—to meet in order to rethink their profession.

A gathering in Istanbul in May 1999 seemed to be an appropriate location for such self-re-examination. The vantage point of fin de siècle—as well as the close of the millennium—provides a site of memory for some major historical events and processes that the region experienced beginning in the early modern era and throughout the modern era, in which the capital of the Ottoman Empire and, later, a major city in the Turkish Republic, played both direct and indirect roles. Suffice it to recall that 1999 commemorated, among other events:

- The 700th anniversary of the Ottoman Empire
- The 300th anniversary of Carlowitz
- Approximately 200 years after Napoleon's invasion of Egypt
- 160 years after the Hatt-ı Şerif of Gülhane
- 80 years after the 1919 national revolution in Egypt
- 75 years after the establishment of the Turkish Republic

- 70 years after the Wailing Wall revolt in Palestine
- Some 20 years after Edward Said's *Orientalism*

We thought that this time and place created an ideal setting for a scholarly rethinking of Middle Eastern studies.

We view this volume as a part of a general effort to re-examine our profession, as an intermediate report on the "state of the art."<sup>1</sup> The intention was modest: We convened a group of scholars for the exchange of ideas, attitudes, and thoughts, checking one another and critically examining various dimensions of the field and of the scholarly profession. In spite of the diversity of the approaches and methods suggested by the various chapters presented here, the common thread is a commitment to rewrite specific areas of the discipline. This, we should stress, is neither an abstract, a theoretical exercise, nor a purely methodological discussion; rather it is a historical inquiry into specific case studies that attempt to implement new insights within real historical experiences and environments. Indeed, the overall aim of this volume is to rethink Middle Eastern studies by "doing history."<sup>2</sup>

Because the forces and processes that shaped and continue to shape Middle Eastern societies and cultures are not exclusive to the region, a serious study of the Middle East should be part of an ongoing dialogue with studies on European and other, non-European, cultures and societies. Hence, the chapters contained in this work attempt to relate to some of the more essential issues concerning the discipline of history at large and beyond it to the humanities in general. Over the second half of the twentieth century, the general study of history was dramatically reshuffled while emulating a whole system of new theories, models, and approaches:

- The "new" social history, with its attention to the symbolic cultural dimensions of social realities.
- The "history from below" and the "history of everyday life," which strive to recover experiences and voices of the ordinary, the subaltern, the outcast, and the marginal.
- Developments in political economy and dependency theories and the study of world economic systems.
- New cultural history, with its emphasis on social and cultural ethnographies and their strong tendency toward anthropological interpretation and the decoding of meanings, and in association with them, the history of *mentalités*, which originated in the Annales school.
- The study of the history of the family.
- Feminist theory, women's studies, and the study of gender relations.

- Intellectual history, focused on the social history of ideas, discourse analysis, and the history of representation.
- The study of collective memory and the complex relationships between history and memory.
- The postmodernist paradigm, with its narrativism and textualism associated with literary criticism and the question of the relations between knowledge and representation and between power and wealth.
- Colonialism and postcolonialism studies.

Put forward in the field of humanities, these new theories and paradigms have had an impact on Middle Eastern studies. The chapters in the volume, and the discussions that helped to develop them, critically relate to these theories and methods in various dimensions while re-examining their applications to political, social, and cultural Middle Eastern cases. We first attempt to highlight some of the general issues that served as an inspiration for the themes presented in these chapters. These issues, we believe, are indicative of theoretical and practical challenges with which the profession is coping, or with which it should attempt to cope.

First, the impact of the “linguistic turn” on the study of history was so considerable that it became common to speak about social, political, cultural, and intellectual history after the linguistic turn. Although perhaps a little late, Middle Eastern scholars learned that language does not reflect reality but rather, constitutes it. Language is not transparent; it is a record, or store, of representations of reality that we attempt to grasp, interpret, and describe. External reality is comprehended through mediated linguistic categories or images of our own, of the historical actors in whom we are interested, of the experiences they undergo, and of the culture in which they live.

A more radical approach considers the language expressed in the text to be the “reality,” or in Jacques Derrida’s words, “*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (There is nothing outside the text).<sup>3</sup> Many years earlier, Ludwig Wittgenstein had already expressed the notion that the borders of the real world are linguistic boundaries, or, “a [linguistic] picture is a fact.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, tangible historical units such as a social group, a nation, a state, and even a class or a family have become discursive formations that are constituted and organized by language. Accordingly, human communities are not only social, political, imagined, or “textual communities,”<sup>5</sup> they are also “discursive communities.” The question that arises immediately is: To what extent does the linguistic turn shape or change the field; that is, does it really help to reach a better understanding of the historical material and processes? Now that scholars have become somewhat disenchanted with this method, the question that remains to be asked is: To what extent can material enti-

ties like cotton, currency, statistics, demography, inflation, trade, or even family, class, and slavery be treated as merely linguistic phenomena, or can human conditions such as poverty, hunger, violence, or crisis be accurately described through linguistic constructs alone? It appears that historical events have been reduced to the status of literary tropes, verbal structures, and rhetorical devices.

In spite of the constructive inspiration of the linguistic turn and the new sensitivities it contributed to the profession, there remains a need to distinguish between language and the world, between evidence and the interpretation of evidence, between reality and its representation, between experience and its meaning. A return to a clear differentiation between text and context—a context that is not merely another textual frame—is essential since a context also contains stable extra-representative physical elements that can be identified and described. An illustration of the limits of the impact of the linguistic turn can be found in the histories written about the Arab-Jewish conflict in Palestine. On the one hand, there have unquestionably been enormous efforts invested since the 1970s to gain a better understanding of both Ottoman and mandatory Palestine; on the other hand, one of the results is the emergence of two supposedly equivalent narratives—the story of the Palestinians and the story of the Zionists. In light of this, then, it must be asked how much has actually been achieved in the profession at all. It certainly appears that scholars have missed an opportunity to contribute to the effort to provide a more realistic and balanced historical view of the topic to the public discourse being conducted in the context of this ongoing, heated political dispute.

The second general issue is the study of elites—the ideas, policies, and practices produced by elites, their experiences, and identities—on which Middle Eastern studies has traditionally been focused. It was assumed that this form of enquiry would give a clue to wider society, culture, or politics in general. This proved misleading, however, as the outcome was a description of the life of the elites alone. Then came the reaction: Scholars became enthusiastically caught up in the history of nonelites, termed “history from below” and “popular culture.” Now, scholars are seeking the social and cultural middle ground, the middle discourse, somewhere between the “high learned culture” and the “low illiterate culture.” There is an attempt to explore the relative social role of both elite and nonelite groups in shaping what Dominick LaCapra has defined as “common culture.”<sup>6</sup> Yet we still know very little about interactions and the mutual feedback between different layers of culture. It is easy enough to isolate a specific cultural layer or trait, a discourse, intellectuals, and secondary intellectuals, and to discuss each of them as defined units. It is far more difficult, however, to identify systems of interaction, negotiation, and agents of mediation operating between these units and the layers of the various levels of culture, society,

and politics. Scholars need to ask where, in the space between high and low cultures, are the lost voices and experiences that were never given attention. It is questionable whether the suppressed, “missing” discourses have indeed been extricated and, if so, what their significance is to the entire cultural field.

Third, for many years the tendency of the profession was to identify broad social structures and processes, or large ideological units, leaning toward structural history. The aim was to identify and analyze the overall structural historical change, to reconstruct processes of *longue durée*. The *Annales* provided us with one example of such a structural history in society, culture, *mentalités*, and even in politics. At the end of the 1970s it appeared as if Lawrence Stone’s call for a “revival of the narrative”<sup>7</sup>—though not in the sense expressed by postmodernism<sup>8</sup>—was bringing about a healthy return to common sense, to more human and less impersonal stories and descriptions. The process of breaking away from the structure was more rapid and more aggressive, however. Now, the tendency is toward the small, the personal, the low-key story, the ethnography of the pastoral, the exotic, the anecdotal, or the episodic, and toward the marginal voices of the oppressed and the inarticulate. There is less attention paid to the big picture, somehow a neglect of the mainstream, and a withdrawal from generalized statements. The danger exists, though, that in limiting our interests to narrower fields of research, we will offer merely small answers to small questions.

Fourth, after having dealt with production and producers, scholars have more recently moved on to deal with the issue of the history of reception and consumers. From the authors we moved to the readers, or at least attempted to. Today, some effort is also directed to the discussion on disseminating and transmitting agents. The field of cultural production has become complex and problematic. Here, too, it is easier to identify the luminary planners and producers of culture but much more difficult to ascertain precisely who are the agents of transmission and what are the communities of reception, particularly now that more recent research has taught us that the consumer of culture is not a passive bystander in the dynamics of cultural dissemination but is also a producer or reproducer of cultural products. Even more complicated is to describe how patterns of consumption and assimilation change a culture’s modes of production, as well as its content and symbols. Hence, in the tension between production, transmission, and reception, there remain some key questions:

- Who produces the repertoire of cultural models?
- What are the forces that enforce and reinforce this repertoire?
- How is the cultural canon constructed?
- Who is pushed to the sidelines and becomes noncanonic?

- What is the nature of reciprocal negotiation, exchange, and appropriation between the various forces and agents operating in the cultural field?

Fifth, current trends in the profession seem to indicate a shift toward what may be termed the “ethnic turn” in the study of history, what Edward Said has critically defined as the “politics of identity.”<sup>9</sup> This trend can also rightfully be called the “politics of me/we” or the “poetics of self/us.” David A. Hollinger insightfully defined this trend: “[T]his ‘ethnicization’ of all discourse through the ‘decentering’ strategies of postmodernism is thus a culmination of the process by which the term ‘ethnic’ has lost its connotations of marginality—originally, ‘ethnic’ meant ‘outsider,’ ‘pagan,’ or ‘gentile’—and has come to stand for situatedness within virtually any bounded community, regardless of its relation to other communities.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the fashion is to contrapose local culture and multiculturalism with the uniformity and universality of the Enlightenment project, which assumes total hegemony for one assimilatory civilization, fusing all cultures into one civilizational melting pot. The large, universal, supposedly canonic narrative is being deconstructed in favor of innumerable local and particularistic narratives. Each narrative, it has been repeatedly claimed, expresses a unique cultural environment; it means different things to different people in different contexts.

Obviously, once the ethnos of the grand narrative—the Eurocentricism, essentialism, male chauvinism, Orientalism, imperialism, and racism inherent in it—had been identified, it became essential to deconstruct it. There is a universal, humanistic justification for enabling many other legitimate voices and narratives to be heard. Hence, a further turn, to the accent on the “*différence*”: an emphasis on heterogeneity as opposed to homogeneity, pluralism as opposed to hegemony, to decentering as opposed to centralization, to the many voices of non-European societies as opposed to the solipsistic voice of the “universalist Enlightenment.” The narratives and stories of women, minorities, subalterns, deviants, and outcasts were recognized and defended.

But to what extent is there an awareness of the price that this ethnic turn demands? With all the charm of multiculturalism, it would still be difficult to deny that color, race, nation, religion and other ethnos-centered particularisms are antithetical to reason, humanism, and social justice. Politics of identity may operate against the universality and globalism of the real problems of class tensions, gender discrimination, child abuse, economic poverty, and political oppression. From a broader view, the ethnic turn seems to have reproduced the opposition between the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the counter-Enlightenment.<sup>11</sup> In the struggle against objective, empiricist positivism, there is a danger to be trapped in subjective, romantic historicism. To be sure, in contrast to the culturalism

of the nineteenth-century classical Romanticism, society today is more aware that culture is invented (“invention” in the Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger connotation of “the invention of tradition”<sup>12</sup>) and that the self is dissolving in intersubjective and intertextual language. Since Giovanni Battista Vico and Johann Gottfried von Herder, however, language has also been strongly linked to cultural identity, ethnic roots, the irrational and the mystic, and to “ethno-centered discourse” as opposed to “species-centered discourse.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, by fostering the politics of identity, a door is opened to a new form of historicist Romanticism.

For Middle Eastern studies, a return to the old universalist enthusiasm may be naive or impossible, since a suspicion will always remain that “universalism” means Western-imposed universalism. However, the postethnic perspective suggested by Hollinger should still be seriously considered; it is a perspective that “tries to remain alert to features of any given *ethnos* common to one or more other *ethnoi* that see each other as opposed. When communities are construed as ‘localities’ to which a norm, an aspiration, or a condition may be ‘historically particular,’ it remains true that these localities can be sites for the display of traits and conditions also found in other localities.”<sup>14</sup>

Sixth, the fixation on the study of literate, or print, culture has been undermined by a growing interest in oral culture, and nonwritten, visual culture—illustrated, photographed, televised, and filmed materials. Until fairly recently, the dominant presumption was that written texts were the key to our historical understanding of social reality. There now exists, however, a growing awareness that these reflect only a portion of the human experience. The relationship between written, printed texts and diverse, visual texts in the process of building culture and in its changes, has been realized to be more complex than once thought. The fascination with film as representing key dimensions of modern culture is particularly striking. But here, too, there exists a feeling that the “visual revolution” is closing in on itself. It is vital to Middle Eastern studies to consider cinema and television as visual media that represent Middle Eastern realities. Nevertheless, it is also crucial to study the essential negotiations and exchanges between the visual and written texts and other nonvisual texts operating in the field of cultural production in print capitalism. There is also a need to locate the visual text in the overall cultural system of society and to weigh its relative role in creating that society’s cultural meanings, experiences, and social practices.

### Middle Eastern Perspectives

Focusing on specific case studies, each of the chapters in this volume, in its own way, attempts to appropriate or negotiate these broader issues, offering reappraisals and new perspectives on modern Middle Eastern history. The

topics range from the material world of economic history to the visual arts studied by cultural historians. Covering the period from the late eighteenth century to the contemporary Middle East, the studies deal with territories of the Ottoman Empire, the Arab Middle East, and Iran. Despite the wide scope, some basic elements are shared, allowing for a fruitful academic exchange among the various approaches. All the contributions are concerned with major trends in historical developments, while they adapt their approaches to individual case studies. Most important, they raise methodological questions concerning possible conceptualizations of the interrelation between the micro and the macro levels in the context of Middle Eastern history.

The present collection approaches modern Middle Eastern history via the study of specific local developments situated within a global, international framework. Part 1 focuses on aspects of nineteenth-century history against the background of a developing colonial setting. Part 2 brings into focus particular Middle Eastern aspects of globalization—seen once from the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries and once from the end of the twentieth century. Attempting to recover “lost voices” in the pre–World War I period, Part 3 addresses issues in the field of intellectual history within the colonial age proper. Part 4 deals with what may be seen as essentially anti- or postcolonial phenomena, namely, processes of formation of national discourse and identity. Finally, Part 5 reviews the various chapters of this volume in light of a more general perspective.

In Chapter 2, Şevket Pamuk offers a study in political economy (traditionally reserved for the approach to modern societies), which stands out for its subject and period under investigation, the great Ottoman debasements of 1808–1844. Debasement, that is, the reduction of the specie content of the currency by the monetary authority—which provided temporary relief from shortages of species and coinage—has widely been considered the result of a haphazard process and, ultimately, an exercise in futility. By contrast, Pamuk argues that the persistence of debasement throughout the medieval and early modern periods suggests that these interventions could not simply be futile efforts. He sees the appeal of debasements in the fact that they provided fiscal relief for the state with regard to its obligations to soldiers, bureaucrats, and suppliers that were expressed in monetary units of account and thus functioned often as an alternative to additional taxation. Moreover, the issue of debasement was not determined by the government alone but often depended upon the struggle between it and various social groups. Pamuk argues further that the spectrum of social groups involved was a rather wide one, since—contrary to the traditional assumption that the use of money was limited to long-distance trade and parts of the urban economy—the monetary economy went well beyond these limits and, consequently, debasements affected virtually all groups of Ottoman society. On



the basis of this analytical framework, Pamuk's investigation of the great debasements of 1808–1844 shows that government policies follow a clear cost-benefit rationale and that Mahmud II (1808–1839) appears to have used debasement as a tool for centralization. Later on, that instrument of fiscal policy was abandoned not for lack of effectiveness but due to European pressure.

In Chapter 3, as in Chapter 11, modern themes are found in contexts that are usually considered distinctly premodern with regard to the themes in question. Seen within the wider debate on the beginnings of the modern period, within which the “baseline” was first moved from 1798 into the second half of the eighteenth century and is now about to be relocated to the midnineteenth century (and, at times, beyond), the two chapters do not call for a shift in paradigm. Rather their contributions highlight the complexity of the developments, thus questioning the seemingly clear-cut dichotomy between premodern and modern.

In Chapter 3, the findings of Wael B. Hallaq's investigation of the potential for legal change in the late 1820s may point in a similar direction as Pamuk's, namely, that the Islamic legal tradition was abandoned not for its lack of ability to modernize but due to European pressure, which drew on the enduring scholarly paradigm according to which Islamic law suffered from a rigidity that ultimately led to paralysis. In his chapter, Hallaq aims at showing three major points: (1) The mechanisms of legal change constituted a structural feature of the law; (2) the discourse of the author-jurist—as a manipulator of the discursive tradition (a hitherto overlooked category or role)—was necessarily an integral part of these structural mechanisms; and (3) through the discursive strategies of the author-jurist, a fundamental reformation of legal methodology and theory was effected. Specifically, Hallaq investigates the treatment of the issue of custom as a source of law by the last major Hanafite jurist, the Damascene al-Sayyid Amin Ibn 'Ābidīn (1783–1836). He begins with an overview of the debate on custom as a legal source within Islamic law, in particular in the Hanafite tradition. Against the background of that outline, the detailed analysis of Ibn 'Ābidīn's writings on the issue can place him firmly within the Hanafite tradition, while he introduces a major change: the acceptance of custom as a legal source. Ibn 'Ābidīn may thus be seen as having taken the first step paving the way to modern legal reform, which would seem quite different from the one chosen by later modernist reformers such as Muhammad Rashid Rida.

In Chapter 4, while drawing on a micro-historical approach within a global framework, Mary Wilson is able to change perspectives on, and the understanding of, one specific episode: a ritual murder trial in Damascus. Whereas it has traditionally been seen in the lineage of an enduring theme in European Jewish history since the twelfth century, Wilson relocates the