

The Urban Social History of the Middle East, 1750-1950

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Reviewer:

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The Urban Social History of the Middle East, 1750–1950 is an ambitious attempt to write a comprehensive account of 200 years of Middle East history from a social history perspective. This well-written edited volume brings together some of the most prominent historians of the Middle East and the result is an engaging read which addresses many issues and aspects of Middle Eastern history that are sometimes omitted or only superficially touched upon.

As Peter Sluglett points out in the introduction, the urban social history of the Middle East is a field of historic enquiry which has been growing in strength and depth over the last decades as a result of increased access to Islamic court records and Ottoman administrative archives. With these ‘new’ resources at hand, historians have been able to fill in the gaps in periods for which historical knowledge was previously lacking. The present work thus studies a period of Middle Eastern history – from the mid 18th century to the mid 20th century – that traditionally has received relatively little academic attention. This is especially true as regards the earlier part of the period.

The book opens with an introductory chapter that contains a very useful historiographical overview of the field, written by Peter Sluglett and Edmund Burke III. The first half of this introduction, authored by Sluglett, presents the rationale of the book and then moves on to a thorough discussion of the existing literature on urban social history. This literature review is not only concerned with the Middle East, but starts off with a discussion of European literature as well, before moving onto to French scholarship on Middle Eastern cities, especially the works of André Raymond and his disciples. This latter section is written by Burke, who continues with an overview of American research into North African cities. Sluglett then dwells lengthily on the pioneering work using Islamic court records carried out by Raymond and Abdul-

Karim Rafeq (one of the volume's contributors).

In chapter two, entitled 'Interdependent Spaces', Sarah D. Shields covers the topic of city-countryside relations in the 19th century. As most historians of the Middle East will recognise, this is a fascinating topic as during this period a virtual revolution in production relations, technology, demography and the social makeup of the agricultural countryside took place in the region, which shaped much of what was to come in the 20th century. The population of the region tripled during the 19th century, classes of wealthy landowners were able to consolidate their wealth and with the Ottoman Land Law of 1858 finally obtained legal protection of their holdings, and the region's incorporation into an emerging capitalist world economy on unfavourable terms meant a redirection of production practices towards raw materials, such as cotton, rather than staple foods. Shields briefly discusses the disagreement that exists among Middle East historians over the impact of the Ottoman Land Law. The fault line runs between those who diminish its impact, arguing that it merely cemented existing practices and those who claim that it revolutionised relations in the Middle Eastern countryside. All in all, Shield's chapter provides a good introduction to the problem of landowning in the region and the dramatic capitalist transformations that occurred in the countryside during the 19th century.

Chapter three, Dina Rizk Khoury's 'Political Relations Between City and State in the Middle East, 1700–1850', starts with an important historiographical discussion concerning the very essence of Ottoman history. As Khoury points out, the urban social history of the Middle East forms part of the larger historiographical debate concerning the wider Ottoman Empire as a whole. Traditionally nationalist Arab historians have tended to read history backwards starting from the vantage point of modern Arab states, arguing that 'Arab' cities in the Ottoman Empire were never fully integrated into the Ottoman 'system'. Instead, they argued, these cities formed part of a local identity that was either defined as a 'nationalist' identity or as being constituted of an 'urban patriotism'. This trend has been particularly poignant with Arab historians studying peripheral cities such as Cairo and Baghdad or North African cities where Ottoman control was the feeblest. These historians mostly relied on local sources and rarely or never utilised Ottoman archives. In addition, they were mostly not Ottoman historians in the sense that they lacked a firm grasp of the overall history of the Ottoman Empire. Instead they focused on the Arab 'A'yan that acted as middlemen with the Ottoman authorities, and the ways in which these local elites were able to expand their influence during the late Ottoman period and how they were transformed into 'national' elites with the formation of Arab states in the wake of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century. However, as Khoury shows, since the 1980s this trend has gradually been replaced by two new approaches. On the one hand, there has been a recognition of the importance of Ottoman rule among historians, resulting in the utilisation of both Ottoman and Arab sources. On the other hand, lately an Islamist approach has emerged that has attempted to re-examine the Ottoman Empire to show it as a viable political model that due to its Islamic character is a preferable choice to the national states that emerged in its void. In contrast to Arab nationalist historians, Ottomanists have tended to focus on areas where the Ottoman state was more firmly in control, such as urban areas in Western Anatolia and the Balkans, and have tended to speak of the Ottoman Empire as a homogenous unit. But what is needed in Khoury's view, and this reviewer tends to agree, is a merging of these approaches. Historians studying the urban history of the Middle East must be well versed in both the local and the general.

Chapter four moves away from the more generic discussions of previous chapters and delves into the particulars of the economic organisation of cities in Ottoman Syria. The chapter is written by the abovementioned Abdul-Karim Rafeq, the pioneer of Islamic court records perusal. Rafeq discusses the complex interactions of economic relations that existed in an empire ostensibly ruled by Islamic law (with its moral prohibition of usury among other things) but where Ottoman secular law increasingly made inroads due to the empire's incorporation into the orbit of the capitalist world economy and because of mounting pressures for legal exemptions for foreigners prescribed by the Capitulations. As Rafeq points out, on the practical level these contradictions were often pragmatically solved, as happened in Anatolia and the Balkans where business practices were adapted to conform to pre-Islamic Turkic or pre-Ottoman Byzantine practices. Rafeq further discusses the setup of local guilds in Syrian cities, which constituted the backbone of

the traditional economy and the Syrian urban society during the Ottoman period. He also outlines various business practices that existed at the time and ends with the inevitable discussion of the impact of European economic and financial encroachment.

Chapter five is jointly authored by Leila Fawaz and Robert Ilbert and analyses political relations between cities and the state in what they term the 'colonial' period. Like Khoury, Fawaz and Ilbert outline a historiographical debate concerning Ottoman urban history where the Ottoman period has been derided by Arab and French historians alike. In general, these historians would contrast the Ottoman period with an imagined 'glorious' period under the (Arab) Umayyads and 'Abbasids, arguing that the Ottoman era represented a period of urban decline, deterioration and social segregation. As Fawaz and Ilbert show, this historiographical trend originates from distinct traditions. On one hand, French colonialists sought to present French rule in Maghreb and Mashreq as a major improvement on the Ottoman period, and on the other hand, Arab historians struggling for political independence from Ottoman, French or British control had no particular interest in lauding Ottoman achievements. This historiographical quandary is only a logical outcome of the region's modern history and illustrates the intersections of politics and historical enquiry. Fawaz's and Ilbert's chapter provides an interesting discussion of the ways in which cities provided scenes for political struggles between various social groups and the state in the period before 'complete independence', i.e. in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Chapter six, written by Bernard Hourcade, looks at the changing demography of cities and how 'urban space' expanded over the period under study. As Hourcade points out, from Napoleon's 1798 Egyptian expedition to the end of World War II in 1945, the urban population of the Middle East (from Morocco in the West to Afghanistan in the east) increased almost ten times, from 2.8 million to 26 million. Given such dramatic changes, the urban history of the Middle East during this period is a particularly fruitful area of examination. Yet, as Hourcade cautions, Middle Eastern cities differ enormously between themselves. Thus, there is little point in comparison between cities as different as Casablanca, Isfahan or Riyadh – all with their particular history and socio-economic contexts. During the period in question, the Middle East was also dominated by what Hourcade refers to as two 'megalopolises' – Cairo and Istanbul. In fact, in 1800 Istanbul was the fourth largest city in the world and Cairo the eighth. Needless to say, these two giants are not comparable with minnows like Aleppo, Beirut or Tunis. Nevertheless, Hourcade argues that in general the pre-modern Middle Eastern city fits the model of the 'oriental city' with its architecture, spatial organisation and 'oriental' social setup. However, by the 1930s Middle Eastern cities had become more heterogeneous and the 'oriental city' model had been complemented by that of the 'dual city', in which the traditional city had been juxtaposed with a new city, inhabited by Europeans or the new elites arising from the formation of national states in the 1920s. Hourcade's chapter, which is a study of 50 'great cities', tracks the evolution of these urban centres, discussing the impact of colonisation and modernisation.

The penultimate chapter is Gudrun Krämer's 'Moving Out of Place', which studies minorities in Middle Eastern urban societies in the 'long 19th century' (1800–1914). The role of minorities in the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century is a well-known theme in Middle Eastern history and the notion that they acted as 'agents of change' has become an almost universally accepted axiom. Thus, this study too takes this assumption as its starting point and seeks to establish the boundaries of urban space and social interaction of the period. It also tries to answer the question who the 'agents of change' actually were, whether like categories such as 'tribes' and 'nations' minorities too were 'imagined communities'. The much-debated issue of whether non-Muslim minorities were oppressed under Muslim rule, that they were 'second-class citizens' suffering the excesses of 'oriental despotism', or whether they in fact were disproportionate beneficiaries of Muslim 'tolerance', is quickly dismissed by Krämer as a non-starter. In reality, no such clear-cut appraisals hold true because Ottoman society was much more complex than an unambiguous dichotomy between Muslims and non-Muslims would allow for. Muslim treatment of non-Muslims has varied enormously over time and space. However, although there was rarely enforced segregation on the basis of religious sect, in general people tended to distinguish themselves 'voluntarily' one from the other in dress and social norms and also in occupation and where they lived. Yet, during the course of the 19th century these more or less well-established patterns of non-Muslim social existence began

to crumble under the impact of socio-economic, legal and cultural change. Above all, it was the impact of European influence on the Ottoman Empire, causing legal change during the Tanzimat period (1839–76), that altered the role (and the perception) of non-Muslim minorities as they were (sometimes) seen as the protégés of Western powers.

The final chapter is Sami Zubaida's 'Urban Social Movements, 1750–1950'. Spanning two centuries, Zubaida's chapter naturally is general in its approach. He starts by outlining 'traditional' forms of urban politics, carried out by those groups that were vested with political or military power, such as the janissaries, mamluks, the elite 'ulama' and the generic category of 'urban notables'. Below them were the ra'ayah (the herd), the vast urban populations subject to political rule and fiscal exactions. Zubaida then outlines material conditions that set different groups in motion, such as food provisioning, revenue collection and so on. He continues to discuss the evolution from 'pre-modern' to modern forms of political mobilisation and political protest that started to occur during the 19th century in many Arab cities. More in-depth analyses are provided for the emergence and evolution of urban social movements in Cairo and Egypt generally and for Iran.

As a whole, this is a remarkable book. Peter Sluglett has managed to bring together historians of the Middle East with unrivaled knowledge and expertise of the subject under study. Focusing its attention on the urban social history of the Middle East during the late pre-modern and early modern periods it provides essential analyses of a hitherto understudied era and field. *The Urban Social History of the Middle East, 1750–1950* is, despite its dry title, an engaging and evocative read. Overall, it is well written and the research and perusal of secondary literature is exceptional; the bibliography (over 50 pages long!) is an accomplishment in itself and should provide future students with a natural starting point when emerging on careers in research on Middle East urban history. The book will definitely be required reading for any serious university course on the modern history of the Middle East.

That said, a few minor criticisms come to mind. Firstly, and most importantly, it is not quite clear exactly who this book is aimed at. The organisation of the chapters, their titles and their contents, suggests that this is a regular scholarly edited volume, bringing together experts in a field that have been given free rein to write on topics of their own choosing. Yet, the title in itself and the fact that much of the discussion in the book is of a descriptive and narrative nature suggests that its aim is to be a student textbook. However, the authors' writing style, the amount of historical detail and the abundance of specialist terms make it nigh on impossible for anyone without a rigorous understanding of Middle East history and Arabic to make full use of the book. Thus, if intended as a textbook, it will be more suited for a postgraduate audience and in any case it will not be possible to use as an introductory text. Secondly, the book would benefit a great deal – certainly if intended as a textbook but also were it meant as a 'normal' scholarly piece – if it had made use of illustrations (similar to the cover photo). Not only does a wealth of photographs of the early 20th century exist that could have been made use of, but older drawings and in particular city maps (which seems especially pertinent in a book about urban history) abound.

Yet, despite these drawbacks, the book is a welcome contribution to the growing literature on the early modern history of the Middle East and should rightly take its place as one of the core texts of this field. In years to come, many new students of Middle East history will benefit from this volume and the efforts of its distinguished authors.

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