

Background Paper for the Third Annual Conference on Historical Studies
Arab History and Historiography: How was Arab history written, how is it being written today?

The conference aims to examine the possibility of writing Arab history. It begins with questions posed from the perspective of the contemporary historian: is there a history of the Arabs as a single entity? Is there a single Arab history? What is the relevance or limitations of periodization? It recognizes, however, that even these questions assume—for example— the foundation of an Arab nation, and take for granted the Arab state post-independence. This background paper aims to identify and query the assumptions of history and historiography, and to bring to light possible questions and interventions within the field.

Starting in the 1920s and 1930s Arab historical writing underwent a renaissance characterized by the use of modern and Western historical research methodology. This was the result of a growing generation of Arab historians who studied in Western universities, or who had read and absorbed the methods and approaches that characterized Western historical research. These researchers acquired tools that enabled them to critically evaluate documents and sources, and produced high-quality historical scholarship in the modern vein.

Subsequent generations of historians continued this legacy. Today there exists a vast trove of historical knowledge, produced over the last century, on the Arab and Islamic past. The Mashriq produced a number of these historians including: Jawad Ali, Asad Rustum, Nicolas Ziyadeh, Albert Hourani, Charles Issawi, Abdel Aziz al-Douri, Saleh Ahmed al-Ali, Hanna Batatu, Ahmed Ezzat Abdel Karim, Mohammed Anis, Shakir Mustafa, Kamal al-Salibi. The Maghreb also produced remarkable historians, from Ibrahim Harakat, Mohammed al-Qabli, al-Hadi al-Sharif, Abdulla Laraoui, Mohammed Talbi, Hisham Jaet, Ammar al-Talbi, to Abu al-Qasim Saadallah and others.

These historians were products of their time. In reading their work, fields of economic, social, or cultural history must be understood, including the methodologies, schools of thought, and political ideology (from positivist and empiricist, nationalist, Marxist, and Islamist) that informed them. Beyond field or ideology, each historian saw his work within a particular framework, whether it was Pan-Arabism, regionalism (Mashriq, Maghreb, Arabian Peninsula, the Nile Valley etc.) nationalism, Islamic history, or as part of a comparative project.

Understanding Arab history from a contemporary standpoint begins by understanding the epistemological and methodological assumptions of the existing body of work. Beyond the biographies of historians, this involves getting to know the mechanisms of knowledge accumulation that undergirded their work. For example, how did scholars think about periodization, the division of fields, subjects, issues, sources, methods, writers, and main schools? What are the main problematics and assumptions being addressed? What knowledge was gained? What new questions did it— and does it continue to – pose for new generations of thinkers?

It is worth revisiting the legacy of this body of modern historical knowledge from a critical-analytical perspective. In particular, examining the methods and schools of thought that historical knowledge production relied on. What are the achievements of these scholars? What has been gained from such a substantial output of work? Looking to the future, can it be said that Arab historians have come up against—in the epistemology of science—a “cognitive block”? How might such a block be overcome and allow for renewal? What are the questions that must be asked of the past and the possible ways forward?

Based on this thinking, the conference aims to tackle the following themes:

1. The periodization of Arab history:

Is periodization the basic way that Arab historians have discussed their history? If it is, how have modern Arab historians divided their history? Classic European periodization, which the past 200 years of Arab history writing has relied upon, is based on the positivist historical school (historicism in general) that divides world history into ancient, medieval, and modern ‘periods.’ This had a far-reaching influence on modern Arab historians in terms of how they divided the Arab and Islamic past into periods. Many adopted the positivist model, which remains the basis of teaching and thought in most Arab university history departments today.

This method of periodization has been criticized by some of the new historians and structural anthropologists as being Eurocentric. Critics have encouraged a re-thinking of periodization not only in the Arab world, but globally. In terms of Arab scholarship, periodization acquires a special epistemological significance not just for historians, but for researchers in the history of philosophy and in the human and social sciences; in short, any modern discipline that has hitherto relied on a chronological element. A re-thinking of periodization thus opens up numerous avenues for critical engagement in both theoretical and applied context.

2. What kind of history? (Arab, Islamic, Arab-Islamic history, regional, comparative, world)

In the wake of the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the formation of nationalist and Islamic parties calling variously for unity, federation, and states, saw the creation of an ideological-political divide in Arab society. This is implicitly as well as explicitly reflected in the various ideas of the Arab past that can be found represented in modern Arab historical writing – from a vision of the past that constructs the Arab world as an Arab Umma, or the Muslim past as an Islamic Umma. While in some cases links certainly justify historiography in an Islamic framework (as in the case of Brockelmann’s *History of the Islamic Peoples*), or for an Arab framework (as in the case of Albert Hourani’s *History of the Arabs* or Abdel Aziz al-Douri’s history of the Arab nation), distinctions must be made between impartial academic views of the past and anachronistic views. The same is true for national or regional projects, from state-run to ALESCO projects such as the “Reference Work on the History of the Arab Nation” (7 vols, Tunis: ALESCO, 2005). There are also individual and collective efforts to write the history of relatively large geographical areas, such as the history of the Levant, or the Arabian Peninsula, or North Africa. The perspective of comparative world history, however, is almost totally absent in modern Arab history writing, rarely and partially present or commented upon.

It is thus necessary to enquire into the lack of major Arab narrative histories on the model of Toynbee, Pirenne, Braudel, and André Miquel? While earlier Arab history writing did produce major narrative histories of the world in terms of the concepts and conceptions prevalent at the time (such as those of al-Yaaqoubi, al-Tabari, al-Masoudi, al-Shahristani, and Miskawayh), this has not been a continuing trend. Perhaps the reasons are familiar: cultural decline, subordination, theory of center and periphery, and other explanations. However, this phenomenon –as part of the options for modern Arab historiography in the age of globalism and globalization — raises challenges to our knowledge-base that must be addressed.

3. Historiography of the local Arab states from the perspective of nation-states

The formation of the nation state after World War I, and the realization of national independence for the Arab countries in the Mashriq and Maghreb after World War II, was accompanied by the growth of the state. This meant the development of its institutions, structures, elites, and forms of conflict between these elites, which all contributed to the particular construction of “national histories” for these states. Modeled on the national histories of nation-states in Europe, such as French history after the French Revolution (during the nineteenth century) or Italian or German history following unification, these histories replicate rather than respond to Arab realities.

The resulting histories fill the pages of “specialist” books on Arab history, which today make up most school history textbooks. These all share a conceptual starting point, which seeks to create a historical background for the modern nation. This can range from attempts to find geographic and/or historical demarcations that legitimize elites or local ruling families, to policies set out in international treaties and agreements.

While constructing national histories along these lines serves to build civic and national identity, it also creates problems worth studying. From the question of imagined ‘historical’ dividing line between states and nations, to created ethnic and religious identities in the nation-state, the ways and means of national history construction has serious implications when it comes to how we understand unifying Arab identity, our relationship with the ‘other,’ historical injustice, and, most significantly, the historical myths that form national consciousness.

The legacy of this historical project is one that Arab societies today are grappling with as part of an ongoing structural crisis afflicting both societies and political regimes. While the intensity and gravity of this crisis may vary from one society to another, a look at these issues opens avenues critical study not only of approaches to history but its legacies across the countries of the Arab world.

4. Historical enquiry: New fields, new methods

After every epistemological leap or scientific revolution an intellectual consciousness develops, attuned to the new subjects and fields that open up based on the shifts in thinking. In such stages, new dimensions of human life can be discerned and discussed. Thus, in the context of the worsening situation of modern polities and their states and regimes, an “identity-based consciousness” of groups and their religious, ethnic, and general cultural features, is also coming to the fore.

These two forms of consciousness, individually or jointly, have brought to life new fields of historical research, which probes both collective identity and individual specificities. While it is true that the historiography of tribe, family, religious sect, ethnicity, region, city, town, or individual is nothing new in Arab history (indeed classical Arab histories were full of such topics), what is new today comes in the context of the worsening situation of the modern state and the risks of its demise (in the Mashriq in particular). This new situation highlights the functional role of historiography when it comes to creating and re-interpreting the “identities” emerging as the result of oppression, which will form the foundation of future political groupings.

Nevertheless, intellectual consciousness of the marginal, peripheral, or ‘secondary,’ remain separate from ‘official’ or established history. As long as this paradigm dominates, suppressed histories will be studied and the prevailing discourse will continue, regardless of who will use its results and how. Contemporary history and revisionist history thus enter the paradigm of power/knowledge, where knowledge can be used either positively or negatively. It is thus necessary to take identity-based consciousness into account, and to question the historiography of ideas, including patterns of religiosity, and mindsets. So, when studying, for example, disease or epidemics, physical, mental, and social dimensions must be taken into consideration along with medical, social, and political ways of dealing with it, from the use of magic, practices around death and madness, the use of prison, as well as factors of love, emotions, private life, gender, and so on.

The question underlying the study of the past is thus: what has contemporary history writing produced in these fields, what is its value, and what is next?