

Background Paper for the Second Annual Conference for Historical Studies

“The First World War, One Hundred Years On: Perspectives from the Arab World”

Starting in the 1930s, since the emergence of new schools of historical thought, concern with the history and historiography of events has provoked widespread debate among historians. For a considerable period of time, particularly during the 19th century, French, German, and other Western schools of historical methodology focused on the history of the event as the primary material, the building block of historiography and the sequential chronicling of events and their impacts on institutions and state policies. New schools of thought, by contrast, hold the history of ideas and “mind-sets,” or “mentalities,” along with economic and social history, at their core, emphasizing the study of great historical transformations—the extent of continuities and the transformative moments of rupture with continuity. The “Annales” school referred to this as “the long term” approach according to Ferdinand Braudel, one of its most prominent exponents.

The debate on how to approach the study of history underwent a revival in the early 1960s, and again in the 1980s, settling somewhat in the formulations of a number of French historians, such as Pierre Nora and Francois Dosse, and philosophers Michel Foucault and Paul Ricouer, who suggested a “return of the event,” or a renewed “resurrection,” leading to the “legitimizing” of what has been termed “history for the present”; in other words, history written for the present moment. Major events, such as the fall of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Berlin Wall, not to mention the Iranian Revolution and the first and second Gulf wars, ushered in a new approach to writing history that goes beyond chronicling of events, facts, battles, and plausible or directly observed policies. Instead, there developed a history of events that chronicles the moments of rupture and transformation, a history that demonstrates the compelling fluctuation of perspectives between shouldering the burden of the past and opening up to the possibilities of the future. This may be what attracted attention to the new historiography of events, rich with its new horizons, and new concepts, media, and methods of documentation.

Applied to the Arab context, the historiography of the current Arab revolutions, detailed through past and present events and their repercussions, constitutes precisely that: a new historiography. These revolutions have created an arena for writing the history of the explosive moment in Arab historical time, and the ACRPS has made it its mandate to enter this arena.¹

Attempting to bridge these current histories with those of the past, the ACRPS also deems it critical to look at World War I from a fresh perspective. A century has passed since World War I, with its outcomes and consequences for the Arab world. Some of the Arab world’s regions were battlegrounds, some of its populations victims of the war, and many served as soldiers in the armies of the opposing sides. How then does one write the history of this event? How should it be re-written now after the passage of one hundred years? How does one write the history of the period of transformations to which World War I gave way, with its intersecting victories, defeats and effects?

¹ The Center has published some 15 new titles in the historiography of the Arab revolutions, most of them histories of current times.

One might here speak of events or histories sealing the fates of Arab peoples, of the rise of states and administrations along with the sketching of new geo-strategic maps, of the delineation of treaties, pacts, and strategies, of the formation of new social classes, political parties, and forces, such that we may speak of a break in our culture from an imperial and global past and a move toward a future that then resembles “the past of our future days”. It might have occurred to us, or to generations before ours, that our times were indeed those of the nation state and nationalism, the state of the Arab nation, the desired “promised state”.

Eric Hobsbawm (1914-1991) chronicled the history of the 20th century in *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century*, with “short” referencing the dates employed in the chronicling itself since Hobsbawm sees the century beginning with the outbreak of the First World War (1914-1918), or with the Russian Revolution (1917), and ending with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. From an Arab standpoint, others have chronicled the intellectual history of the 20th century as “the long century,”² similar to Braudel’s definition of the 16th century, which included periods of time prior to and after the century. In a similar fashion, could the 20th century for the Arabs not be considered long in its full political and cultural extent? Could it not begin with the struggle of local elites in the Arab-Islamic world to realize the concept of a constitution and citizenship in 1876 (with the Ottoman constitution of that year), and extend to today’s Arab revolutions, starting in 1911 (when World War I extended into the Arab region)? Does the long 20th century, from the standpoint of expansionist western capitalism, extend beyond the logical chronological and economic, political and cultural extension of a nascent imperialism that is later transformed into a “globalization” extending right up to our present day and unleashing two world wars?

In the context of World War I, the projects of local elites, notables, and monarchs intersected, intertwined, and sometimes even merged with those of imperialism in the Arab and Islamic worlds. How did these circumstances and contexts come about? The “event” in this sense is no longer an isolated, concrete situation, but opens to “the future”. In the case of WWI, the “future” is today’s past. For example, the Eastern Arab Revolt was defeated at the Battle of Maysaloun, affecting the entire Arab *mashreq*, while the Turkish Movement was victorious in Anatolia, affecting the destinies of modern-day Turkey. These seemingly distinct events, however, are linked through the end of the Ottoman Empire, breaking with 600 years of memory of shared histories and dates.

Thus, an “event” and its ramifications can sometimes enter into the written and collective memory, as well as the collective unconscious, accurately while at other times the information is distorted or adjusted depending on what is needed from the story.

In terms of imager, this vision of an extended history requires a critical review of what has been written, narrated, fixed in memory, and provided. This enables the development of a framework for organizing ideas and topics that may bind together the two key variables in the desired research: the physical space, which in this case would be the geographical-historical units in the Arab nation and its states, and the topic under discussion as it was situated during the various historical time periods.

² See: Wajih Kawtharani, *Memory and History in the Long Twentieth Century: Studies in Research and Historical Inquiry* (Beirut: Dar at-Taliah, 2000).

Attendees and presenters for the upcoming conferences are invited to approach the topic from a variety of thematic standpoints:

First Theme: A Critical Review of What Has Been Written in the Arab Region on World War I and Its Repercussions

This would include books, memoirs, diaries, oral testimonies (where available), and local and foreign archival documents from:

1. The Arab Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya)
2. The Nile River Valley (Egypt, Sudan and their neighboring African states)
3. Iraq, Syria, Eastern Jordan, Palestine and Lebanon
4. The Arabian Peninsula (the GCC and Yemen)

Second Theme: International Policies and Local Political Projects during World War I

Research into this topic covers the treaties, promises, declarations, and the historical and geographical partitioning of Arab circles and states. It focuses upon the characteristics of the active socio-political forces, their social-cultural backgrounds, and the nature of their links to colonial policies (e.g., loyalties and conflicts). The theme also covers historical lessons learned from the relationships between the parties, including the mindsets that lay behind the negotiations, treaties, and undertakings (i.e., Sykes-Picot, Balfour, San Remo, Lausanne, and so forth)

Third Theme: The Economic, Social, and Cultural Impact of World War I on Arab Societies

This theme also distributes research along the previously discussed lines, but focuses upon two inter-linked issues:

1. A unified analysis or “comprehensive history” of economic, social, and cultural aspects
2. An effort to discover new primary materials, be they written or oral, including forgotten and neglected memoranda offering a focus upon new topics, or materials that have not been adequately investigated in existing writings

Fourth Theme: The Arab Revolutions Post-WWI

Rather than providing a chronology of events for these revolutions, papers submitted for this theme should seek to assess the revolutions and the role they have played. What happened as a result of the revolution? What lessons can be learned?

1. Iraq’s Revolution of 1920
2. The Syrian Revolution (1925) and the Kamalist Revolution in Turkey
3. Palestinian Resistance to the Zionist Project after WWI
4. The Egyptian Uprising (1919-1920)
5. The Omar Mukhtar Revolution (Libya)
6. The Rif Revolution in Morocco led by Abdul Karim al Khattabi

7. Harbingers of the Algerian Revolution in the 1920s

Submission Deadlines

Scheduled for February 2015, the conference committee will accept titles and abstracts until the middle of July 2014. Following an abstract's acceptance, papers must be received by October 31, 2014. All correspondence relating to participation in the conference should be addressed to Mohammed Makiyeh: mohammed.makiyeh@dohainstitute.org.