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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

The Middle East: From Empire to Sealed Identities

Lorenzo Kamel

Edinburgh University Press, 2019, 264 pp., £75 (Paperback)

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REVIEWED BY MARCO AMMAR

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While the scholarly literature is replete with works claiming a comprehensive analysis of modern Middle East history, few authors have actually built their investigation on identity-related perspectives. Indeed, the book, *The Middle East: From Empire to Sealed Identities*, proved faithful to its title, providing a clear historical view of the processes that turned the fluid and multifaceted distinctiveness, which characterised the peoples of this region under the late Ottoman Empire, into sealed-off identities.

Lorenzo Kamel (Associate Professor of History at the University of Turin and historian of the Modern Middle East), overtly challenges both the simplistic idea that many states in present day Middle East are merely artificial Western creations, as well as the widespread belief that wars raging in these regions, are part of a transition which will eventually lead to an ethnocentric stabilisation. He provides historical evidence that the ethnic cleavages and religious differences which make up today's Middle East are socio-economic outcomes of nationalism, globalisation and geopolitics.

Despite the centrifugal forces represented today by sectarian and extremist movements, Sunnis, Shi'as, Christians, Jews and other local religious minorities have achieved – within a clearly different framework – one of the highest levels of symbiosis history has ever recorded. The Middle East – Kamel strongly contends – is not a continuum of historical discontinuities, as commonly depicted in current scholarly and journalistic literature, but quite the opposite, the whole region has witnessed centuries-long continuity.

The seven chapters that make up the book cover a temporal range that spans the so-called “Long XIX Century of the Middle East”, starting from the early reforms under Sultan Maḥmūd II (1808-1839) and ending conventionally with the League of Nations Mandates (the 1920s).

Preliminary remarks from Chapter 1 (“Beyond ‘Tribes’ and ‘Sects’: On Concepts and Terms”) address concepts such as state, capital, border, citizenship, sectarianism and a number of other related notions, showing how some of these words shifted in meaning and progressively acquired relevance – due to the agency of external actors – such as the Protestant missionaries – thus introducing unprecedented categories of (self-)representation in regions where both mental and physical divisions were rather blurred and ambiguous.

In the following three chapters, Kamel sets out to illustrate three momentous events which profoundly disrupted the region's social order, namely the 1831 invasion of Greater

Syria, the Ottoman reform period which followed the Crimean War and the Young Turks revolution.

Chapter 2 (“The First Moment; 1830s: The Germs of Competing Ethno-Religious Visions”) focuses attention on what the author defines as the “opening process” (p. 46), the first major shift towards ethno-religious rivalry, whose early beginnings can be traced back to the 1831 invasion of Greater Syria instigated by Ibrahim Pasha (1789-1848) and the subsequent intervention of France and Great Britain. The growing commercial interests of the latter two powers as well as their explorative missions exposed the region to Western influence. The dynamics enacted in this short but crucial phase would eventually pave the way for the ensuing predominantly Western-inspired reformist era.

Chapter 3 (“The Second Moment; The Tanzimat’s Long Waves: Politicising Ethno-Religious Differences”) builds on the historical background of the Crimean War (1853-56), a watershed which had the immediate effect of forcing the whole region into the world economy. Here, the author examines the long lasting political and identity-related effects of the Ottoman reforms. The concept of patriotism was introduced; a law was passed which favoured the concentration of land ownership in fewer hands, thus exacerbating the social gap between urban families and farmers (p.69); the issuing of the first Ottoman constitution (1876), promoted the idea of Ottoman citizenship, which was soon to be perceived as an attempt to homogenise communities still under Ottoman rule, hence a threat to diversity. This resulted in the sharpening of religious identities and ethnic awareness (p. 84). In this same chapter, Kamel also explores the experience of prominent intellectuals such as al-Ṭahtāwī, al-Afġānī and Abduh whose endeavour to integrate these novelties into their own culture, unintentionally created better conditions for the penetration of secular, nationalist ideas (p. 80).

In Chapter 4 (“The Third Moment; From Ethnocentric Drives to a New Millet System”), the Young Turk Revolution is equated with the most significant event determining the transition from multifaceted to sealed identities: just as the British were pursuing the preservation of religious differences and identities to their own advantage, the “Turkification” campaign triggered a process of alienation that prompted religious communities to embrace a National discourse (p. 97). By the end of the World War I, empires had nearly lost their legitimacy and religious identities were turned into legal categories.

Chapter 5 (“Balfour’s ‘Pattern’”) is a thoroughly documented analysis of the historical figures and changing circumstances that framed the drafting of the Balfour Declaration, and the positive effect it had on the process of homogenisation in the region.

Chapter 6 (“The Racialisation of Middle Eastern People”) discusses the racial drive that lies behind Woodrow Wilson’s principle of self-determination as well as the general practice toward racial separation, enacted after the Paris Conference (1919) and throughout the Mandates period.

Chapter 7 (“Beyond ‘Artificiality’: Borders, States, Nations”) addresses the geographical mapping process and the debate around the (alleged) artificiality of international borders in the region (p. 185).

Kamel’s research is based on a solid knowledge of archival sources: the author’s complete expertise and cogent methodological approach is reflected in his ability to use documentary media ranging from manuscripts to photography, which provides the book with

extra depth and resonance. Relevant mentions from both classical and modern literature enrich each and every chapter, making for further captivating reading. Despite the copious details included, the text is written in an admirably clear and fluid prose that provides even non-specialists with a pleasant reading experience.

Contrary to a dominant historiographical model of the Middle East, as being mostly rationalised and oversimplified by external actors, Lorenzo Kamel's compelling manifesto "re-instils the concept of continuity" (p. 5) in reference to this region, supporting the voices and the efforts of those peoples who have long been left out of their own history.