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The Modern Middle East: A Sourcebook for History

Edited by Camron Michael Amin, Benjamin C. Fortna, Elizabeth Frierson

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Recent political events such as 9/11 and the Iraqi incursion have restarted the debate on the Middle East and its culture, which had lost currency in the United States after the Cold War. This interest also boosted the number of students willing to attend Middle Eastern Studies courses. In a rough comparison of the 1960s and 2000, Middle Eastern Studies in the US have gained ground. Kenneth W. Stein's anecdote on the "Middle East" concept correctly demonstrates the difference in the present condition:

"Half a year after I married a girl from New Orleans, I thought I would try to find a job in that quiet city. One Friday afternoon in December 1969, I approached a member of the History Department in one of its universities. I inquired, "Do you have someone who teaches Middle Eastern history, and if not, would you be interested in hiring a Middle Eastern historian?" The reply came back like a shot. "We have a specialist in the Middle East, Mr. Williams. He has been here for more than a decade." I looked perplexed and answered, "But I checked in the card catalogue, searched the library shelves, and found very little on the Middle East." As I turned to leave the office, I was curious and asked to know Mr. Williams' Middle Eastern area of concentration. The History Department professor put his hand on my shoulder and said in an avuncular tone, 'Mr. Williams did his work and has published numerous articles on Tennessee in the 1840s!'[9]"

The contemporary position of Middle Eastern Studies in the United States is far ahead of the outlook in 1969. However, the lack of native sources in the teaching of Middle Eastern Studies is a major problem in the field. In addition to this, the perception of various researchers of geography and spatial approaches to the topics within Middle Eastern studies has led to the formation of camps in the field. Middle Eastern Studies all over the world have diverged into the Orientalists and the Revisionists. Even those academics who hesitated to be counted in one group or the other have become classified. Revisionists accuse the Orientalists[10] of letting "a Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having

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9   Kenneth W. Stein, "The Study of Middle Eastern History in the United States", *The Jerusalem Quarterly*, Number 46, Spring 1988, pp. 49-64.

10   For different perspectives of the "Orientalism" discussion, see *Orientalism: A Reader*, Ed. Alexander Lyon Macfie (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

authority over the Orient".[11] The editors of this book claim that they support neither party, and actually, the book does not try "to reconcile debates between the 'Orientalists' and 'Revisionists' or to resolve other long-standing controversies."[12] This book, then, could be seen to be a sign of minds who are trying to concentrate on the usage of primary sources in the field. The linguistic requirements in understanding the dynamics of the region are another factor that limits the capability of teachers and students in the field to delve into primary sources. This book presents a wide range of primary sources which have been translated and presented by prominent researchers in Middle Eastern Studies.

The story of this book started when the University of Michigan's Dearborn campus received a $222,396 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to develop, organize and publish a sourcebook for the study of Modern Middle Eastern History at college and university level.[13] The project grant was for two years and funded activities at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, the University of Cincinnati, and the School for Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. The sourcebook is not the only example in the literature. The major study prior to this book was the *Islamfiche* project, which arose from the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Islamic Teaching Materials Project, which was formed from English translations of texts that had been chosen to reflect the diversity of Islamic societies.[14] There are various secondary sources covering the culture, history, geography and religion of the Middle East, however, there is less primary material for the students to read, discuss and debate in the classroom.

The papers in the book cover texts from 1700 to the present and are concerned with key regions in the Middle East. It is structured on six themes, State and Society, the Press, Media and Society, Gender and Society, Religion and Society, Modern Identities and Views of the World: Redefining Tradition, and Economic Change. Each section is prefaced with an informative introduction, and each document contains annotations as needed. In understanding the state, the main pitfall for historians is that when considering the nature of the state and society they fail to grasp the local concepts. The editors of the book have noted in the introduction to the chapter on state and society: "One challenge for historians is that, while what constituted the 'State' and its purpose changed remarkably over the centuries, it is much easier for historians to approach, quantify,

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11   Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), p. 3.
12   From the preface of the Middle East Source book
13   http://www.neh.gov/news/report2000/education.html
14   Islamfiche [microfiche]: *Readings from the Primary Sources*, Ed. William A. Graham & Marilyn R. Waldman (Zug, Switzerland: Inter Documentation, 1984).

and analyze the state than to conceptualize, measure and evaluate 'Society', so that our sources lead us to top-down understandings which this section seeks to counterbalance with social history sources."[15] Even though the editors confirm that social history helps us to understand society, it is hard to perceive this in the layout of the chapters.

In the preliminary stages of this project Camron Michael Amin, one of the inspirations behind the project, said: "The goal is to have documents that are coming right off of people's current research" and added "We are asking our colleagues throughout the field of Middle East studies to contribute a document or an item that they think will be great in the classroom setting."[16]

The book also includes such standard texts as treaties, constitutions and other legal documents; these documents were chosen to give the student a sense of how ideas and policies are put into practice. Amin also expressed how they decided which legal papers to include: "Rather than putting in a copy of a press law, we would prefer to have a transcript of the trial of someone being prosecuted under that press law in order to see how that law was applied and challenged."[17]

Amin emphasizes that this sourcebook does not serve any political agenda: "It's about getting as complete and as complicated a picture as we can of all aspects of these societies, not just their political issues," he says. "Those things are part of their history, but the sourcebook is not organized around resolving political issues or picking sides."[18]

A contribution by Middle Eastern researchers to this project would have enriched the scope and quality of the work. However, it is important to note that there is a useful bibliography at the end of each chapter, which eases initial research. The first four chapters of the sourcebook try to portray the status of state, society, press, media, gender and religion in the region. In Chapter Five, the sourcebook endeavors to give an idea about the modern identities which started to appear in the region; in Chapter Six we see how the world is perceived by the region described. The formation of new identities and the construction of worldviews led local people to "redefine (their) traditions", perceived as *raisons d'être* in the Middle East. The editors conclude the sourcebook by adding a chapter on "Economic Change", which defines the economic sustainability indicators of the countries of the region.

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15 *The Modern History Sourcebook*, p. 1.
16 See http://www.ur.umich.edu/0001/Sep18_00/11.htm
17 *ibid.*
18 *ibid.*

The book has eight chapters which start with the state and end with economics. The first chapter, entitled "State and Society", contains fourteen texts which range from a report dated 1674 to the Program of the Ba'ath party in 1963. This chapter follows a power-driven approach and focuses on state-exercised modernization issues, such as: "Negotiating the power of the Sultan: the Ottoman *Sened-i Ittifak* 1808"; "Observing Muhammad ʾAli Pasa and his administration at work 1843-1846"; and, "Wahhabi ʾUlama and the State in Saudi Arabia, 1927."

The second chapter focuses on the "Press, Media and Society." This section contains articles on Egyptian Papagallo, To'jjor, Seruan Azhar and the Iranian, LeMan. The time range of dates for the articles is from 1851 to 1910, 1925-1947, and 2001-2002. However, there is no particular stress on how the periods of the Arab-Israeli wars (1948, 1956, 1967, 1973) were considered by the press and media. However, these periods were critical to the shaping of the strategic balances in the region.

"Gender and Society" is the third chapter of the sourcebook and encompasses subjects from Indian Muslim womanhood, the gender and class of Ottoman officials (including excerpts from *Al-Fatat wa'l-Bayt*), gender and morality in Iran, the Arab Women's Committee in Jerusalem, to an article about two women fighters in Algeria. "Religion and Society" is one of the best-planned parts of this book. The chapter covers critical topics like the abolition of the Caliphate, the Islamic revival, revolutionary Islam, the *ulama*, public morality, and the use of history by Bin Laden. However, other religions and the Sufi orders of the region have been neglected. There is no mention of Christians (Catholics, Orthodox or Maronite), the Druze, the Nusayriyyah, Yazidis, or Mandaeism.

Chapter Five has a controversial title: "Modern Identities." In this part of the book, the reader can read Anwar al-Sadat's speech to the Israeli Knesset, Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq's speech on Iran and the National Front on 27 September 1951 and an interview with Boubeddi Ben Ayyad, a Moroccan veteran of the French army in World War II; all of these reflect the approach of political elites. "The three kinds of Politics" by Yusuf Akçura, excerpts from *The Turkish World,* and Pan-Asianism in the late Ottoman Empire are the other topics covered in the fifth chapter. It is well recognized that the identity crisis of the Middle East was an outcome of a period of change and modernization. In the beginning, this change was lead by government institutions, but continued with individuals. It would therefore be to the point if the reader was able to find texts that related to personal identity crises.

The sixth chapter tries to elaborate upon the concept of modern identities with a particular focus on "Views of the World". This chapter includes various personal accounts which represent the "change" in perceptions in Middle Eastern societies. "The West through the eyes of an Iranian Qajar monarch: Naser al-Din Shah's first trip to Europe in 1873", "The Ottoman home front, a German correspondent's remarks, 1917", and "The Journals of an Ottoman student in England, July 1829 to January 1830" are articles that give direct insights. Local people who went and experienced Europe and the West went on to question their identities and positions in the region. These people from the Middle East were stuck between change and tradition, and as a result reconstructed their traditions in keeping with the changing codes of the century.

Chapter Seven tries to draw outlines of new traditions. "Imams in the Reformed Army of Mahmud II"; "Science in Religious Education: A Fatwa from Cairo, 1888"; and, "Taha Husayn: Revolt against Tradition, from *Al-Ayyam*, 1939" are the leading articles that reveal the problems inherent in "redefining tradition."

"Economic Change" is the eighth and last chapter in the book. In this study, the economic condition of the region is granted only one chapter. However, the natural resources of the Middle East, in particular oil and natural gas, have had an exceptional affect on the politics of the region. Even from the historical point of view, it is hard to ignore the Ottoman's *timar* system of irrigation and its influence on the formation of the political systems of the region, such as the *zuama,* the former landlord class which manipulated the politics of Lebanon. "Economic Change: Muhammad ʾAli's Development Schemes in Egypt and Syria, 1834 and 1837", "Financial Imperialism and its Relationship to Development; the Ottoman Public Debt Administration, 1881-1925", and, "Development Concessions, the D'Arcy Concession for Iranian oil, 29 May 1901" are amongst the few articles that are presented to demonstrate the effects of the regional economy on the political structure.

One would expect to see a more human-centered perspective, as mentioned by one of the editors. However, it is clearly noticeable that the materials in the book were collected for the most part from state archives, leading to an oversight of the public, or popular, level. It is hard to find materials on the households of the Middle East, or the lives of the workers in the Middle East. Micro history is almost totally ignored in this study. However, the editors could have added pieces by such eminent figures from the Middle East

as Izzat Muhammad,[19] or have provided excerpts from their books. Izzat Muhammad's book gives various insights from his personal experience which would have helped readers to understand an individual's perceptions of the political process.

The editors have also published *errata*, updated on 16th March 2007. This shows that the editors are continuing to work on the project, and this should encourage us to anticipate future volumes of the work. Another point that should be mentioned is the digital availability of some of the articles in the book; the project has uploaded some material onto their website,[20] which has created an opportunity for scholars who are unable to find this expensive book in their libraries to have access to it. The editors expressed their goodwill regarding the digital versions in this way: "We want our colleagues and their students to freely circulate and discuss these documents as part of their study of Middle Eastern history." They also give the good news that "more documents will be made available over time, and, we plan to include audio-visual material as well."

The editors aim to bridge the gap between research and pedagogy in Middle Eastern Studies with this work. They have succeeded in achieving their goal with 79 articles grouped into eight chapters. This book is a helpful resource for teachers and students of Middle Eastern Studies who want to grasp the realities of the region and its local sources. The research can also guide prospective students in the field prior to making decisions about which subject they would like to concentrate on in their research projects.

One believes that the use of primary sources will change perceptions and approaches to the region and its study as well. This book is quite a good resource in that it enriches the materials available to Middle Eastern studies. This can only be a starting point and should not be the sole volume available on the market. Academic associations in the realm of Middle Eastern Studies also should promote and support these kinds of projects so as to develop a better understanding of the region.

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19 Izzat Darwaza, *Mi'at am filastiniyya: Mudhakkirat wa tasjilat (One Hundred Palestinian Years: Memories and Notes)*, Damascus, 1984.
20 http://sitemaker.umich.edu/emes/sourcebook