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Arab History and Arab Historiography

Past and Present Forms of Writing**

التأريخ العربي وتاريخ العرب كيف كتب وكيف يكتب؟
الإجابات الممكنة

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Introduction

The book begins with a 20-page introduction that includes the background paper for the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies' Third Annual Conference for Historical Studies, held in Beirut on 22-24 April 2016. Next comes a preface written by Dr Wajih Kawtharani, conference coordinator and chair of the Academic Committee, entitled "Arab Historiography: Between Universal and Partial History". It is followed by a leading article by Lebanese historian Khaled Ziadeh, offering a structured summary of observations regarding "The Use of Documents in the Writing of Arab History".

The conference's various themes provided a solid framework for 32 methodological and historical contributions, all of which were deliberated during the conference proceedings and subsequently drafted and prepared for publication by the conference coordinator. The papers come in one volume (1056 pages, with a 39-page index) divided into three sections. The first is titled "Writing Arab History: Content, Periodization, Method" and consists of 10 submissions (315 pages); the second, "Issues and Trends in National Histories", consists of 8 submissions (270 pages); and the third is "Comparative History and Issues in the Field of Memory and History" (384 pages), with contributions centred around two main subjects: comparative history (with 5 contributions) and the relation of memory to history (with 9 contributions), or what may also be termed "Forms of Historically Interpreting the Representative".

Starting Points

The book begins with the conference background paper, which discussed the broad concerns that prompted the organisers, or supervisors, to hold the event, all of which related to the process of knowledge building and the production of historical significance in the Arab contemporary period. It specifically addressed the importance of knowledge accumulation in both the Mashreq and the Maghreb and the presence of epistemological barriers to historical research, overshadowing the interpretation of temporal contexts, the construction of historical epochs, and the definition of disciplines—or spatial settings, topics, sources, methodologies, and research approaches and/or models. All of these are impediments which warrant contemplation around the best possible way to overcome them.

It would be irrational to continue replicating the classical European model of historical divisions in light of the increasing demands to re-examine its marked, universally ethnocentric orientations. Further, it is unproductive that the deliberate ambiguity of Arab historiography should proceed from the Arab and/or Islamic concept of *umma*, keeping with the Orientalist school's accomplishments through the works of Carl Brockelmann, Albert Hourani, and others to avoid falling into projection or "anachronism" when constructing comprehensive Arab/Islamic histories or major regional monographs (i.e., on the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Maghreb). The same applies to the difficulty of incorporating the history of the Arabs within comparative world histories, as addressed in the writings of Arnold Toynbee, Henri Pirenne, Fernand Braudel, André Miquel, and others. This is also true of the Arab-Islamic Golden Age between the ninth and fourteenth centuries AD, as demonstrated by the works of Aḥmad ibn Ishāq al-Ya'qūbī (d. 282 AH/ 897 AD), Muḥammad bin Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310 AH/ 923 AD), 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī al-Mas'ūdī (d. 346 AH/ 957 AD), Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d. 548 AH/ 1153 AD), and Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Miskawayh (d. 421 AH/1030 AD).

Contributions on national or territorial histories, too, were influenced by the faltering trajectories of postcolonial states, primarily established for the purpose of civil development and the dubious formulation of nation-state projects. These processes were generally unsuccessful in offering precise answers on a wide range of topics related to borders, plurality of belonging, and the relationship with pre-Islamic histories

as well as foundational myths of national consciousness. This fact was confirmed as new generations of Arab historians shed light on unfamiliar subjects that, until recently, had been considered taboo, directing us toward the lives and works of important historical figures, as well as their religious, ethnic, and cultural particularities.

The background is followed by a preface by Chair of the Academic Committee Wajih Kawtharani, in which he deconstructs the predicament of the universal and the partial within contemporary Arab historical writing. This issue is what compelled researchers approaching this history from outside to use specific terms rooted in the “history of Arab/Islamic peoples”, for whom the geography of language and culture took part in forging or constructing homogeneity within an “abstract society”, as embodied by the movements of large ethnic groups and the commercial, religious, or intellectual elite from the Mashreq to the Maghreb.

Iraqi historian Abd al-Aziz Duri (1919-2010) dealt with this topic in his book *The Historical Formation of the Arab Nation*. Yet historical efforts such as this, based on a structural perspective presenting broad historical narratives, were not met with promising engagement from the contributors to this volume, who have instead employed territorial or national histories. The authors renounced what Kawtharani described as “the structural, or synthetic, universal history of major regions” (i.e., the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, the Nile Valley, and the Maghreb; p. 33) in their efforts to expand upon or critique Abdallah Laroui’s work in the early 1970s, through his comparative structural outline *History of Morocco*. It became evident that the section on historiographies of the individual and the questions around how memory relates to history, as well as the focus on the history of minorities and the marginalized based on inter-disciplinary approaches, comes as part of an attempt to address the shortcomings of previous scholarship – to avoid the heavy toll of hesitating to engage epistemologically with what has come to be universally conceptualised as the “historical-cultural turn”.

The conference coordinator chose to place Khaled Ziadeh’s contribution in the introductory section of the book given the centrality of the relationship that ought to link historical knowledge to its various corpora, and because its content aligns with the background paper. In his study entitled “The Use of Documents in the Writing of Arab History”, the Lebanese historian emphasises the need to expand access to archival records and employ them to build historical hypotheses on Arab histories. This need was previously highlighted in studies by Orientalists (e.g., Gustave Le Bon and Karl Brockelmann). In their study of Arab societies and their economies, Arab historians still rely heavily on sources such as consular documents and Sharia court records, on the model of André Raymond’s research. They thus move beyond the reviews and books that only address collections of narrative prose (*kutub al-akhbār*) and political and military events, to extensively investigate the issues related to the evolution and rise of prices, social protest movements, and other contexts indicative of a shift from traditional reality and an aspiration in the Arab world to assimilate with the age of modernity. In this vein, Arab historians should draw upon the work of the French Annales school – which contributed to shaping this approach after World War II – if they are to move beyond the various Arab narratives that remain concerned with implicit or explicit ideological perceptions.

The Making of Arab Histories: Between Universalism and Localism

It is no small task to utilise all the various insights as to how the rapid transformations that have influenced, and continue to influence, historical knowledge universally are related to the different forms to which the production of Arab histories at Arab and non-Arab research institutes has been subject over the past century. This book includes at least ten contributions that, through an array of methodologies, pose a set of issues which may be critically classified according to two main themes. The first re-visited the issue of Arab historiography from the perspective of world history through collective or universal histories,

as modelled by Ahmad Shboul, Ahmed Abushouk, Ibrahim Boutchich, Mohammed Maraqtan, Ammar al-Samar, and Mohammed al-Azhar al-Gharbi. The remaining contributions from Mohammed Ezzeddine, Abdulrahman Shamseddine, Anwar Zanati, and Amal Ghazal dealt with the same topic through specific sources or particular examples.

As representations of the limited development of Arab historical knowledge during the late Middle Ages, the corpora of ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Mas‘ūdī and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Khaldūn (d. 808 AH/ 1406 AD) were re-evaluated using modern methodologies that invoke contexts for the formation of human civilisations, as modelled by Fernand Braudel, William McNeil, and Oswald Spengler, and how these contexts have been applied within the Orientalist perspectives of Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, around the “Clash of Civilizations” concept, or the writings of those who continue to argue against it. Further, addressing the various challenges that have obstructed consensus on best practises for temporally constructing the events of Arab history has re-opened the discussion on the universality of historical writing and prompted research on how best to situate this historical narrative within the three eras of universal analysis (i.e., ancient, medieval, and modern) or Braudel’s three temporalities (i.e., the long-term or the structural, the periodical or the social, and the incidental, or rapid political events). The same applies to the contributions of the Orientalist school through the works of Will Durant, Marshall Hodgson, and Shelomo Dov Goitein, in opposition to counterarguments for the “Islamisation” of those histories based on the proposals of some Islamists and in support of the epistemology of eras as articulated in the works of Mohammed Arkoun and Abdallah Laroui.

This representation is experiencing a substantive qualitative shift in light of calls to transcend political eras and associate our understanding of Arab histories with an approach based on cultural eras: one which explains key phenomena from the premise of epistemological (not political) transformations, accounting for the “shock” the Arab region experienced as a prelude to a second Arab renaissance that would bring the accomplishments of the 19th century to completion. The new universal era of human history heralded significant transformations by way of the digital revolution, producing novel human action following its success in hybridising religious, linguistic, national, and gender identities. The “cyber era” brought a decisive end to an old world, such that the universe became a new entity where historians needed to develop their tools according to the dictates of “presentism” and anticipate what the future has in store for humanity by examining relevant field research or theory on the mounting dynamism of social media networks.

It may be the case that considerations regarding how the Arab World’s earliest ancient civilisations¹ emerged are intimately linked to the need to rethink the methodology of their historiography, and to reconsider the extent to which the Arab *umma* is inclusive of their associated identities. Yet recognising the paucity of insightful reflection on the subject and the dominance of Western archaeology, in its colonial-mundane and Biblical-religious conceptions, invites us in the present to engage decisively with advancements in the discovery of artifacts and engravings on the Arabian Peninsula over the past three decades, such as Assyrian and Babylonian inscription tablets as well as Syriac, Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Sabaean sources, to bypass the limited or stereotypical historical depictions as to the ancient history of the Arabian Peninsula and its civilisations which sources from Arab-Islamic heritage have proliferated. This, in our estimation, was the objective of the two remaining contributions on the subject, which sought to examine not only the official attempts at writing Arab history but also the extent to which those attempts produced accurate, authentic knowledge about the economic history of the Arabs. Despite contributors’

¹ For example, the Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian civilisations in Mesopotamia; the Pharaohs in Egypt; the Ebla Kingdom, Ugarit, Canaanites, and Arameans in the Levant; the Dilmu and Magans in the Arabian Peninsula and Oman; the Sabaean, Qatabanians, Minaean, and Himyarites in the western Arabian Peninsula; the Kindites, Lihyanites, Tayma, Nabataeans, Hatra, or Tadmur in the northern Arabian Peninsula and its peripheries, as well as Numidians and Amazigh in the Maghreb.

praiseworthy efforts in understanding official experiences in Syria (which have not been fully explored) and the achievements of the Arab League's Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation in publishing the seven-part *Sourcebook for the History of the Arab Nations*, consistent with the multitude of constraints its authors encountered, the results indicate that reaching these stated objectives is impossible, as asserted by the German historian Ulrike Freytag in her *Syrian Historiography 1920-1990: Between the Scientific Approach and the Hegemony of Ideology*.

Moreover, interrogating the space occupied by economic history at the core of Arab historical knowledge and the scope of historians' participation in adopting its various approaches, in pursuit of a greater understanding of the different historical periods or stages that Arab states have experienced, is a matter worth contemplating and an issue which Arab historical knowledge has been conclusively shown to be inadequate in addressing. The consensus is to attribute this fault to Arab scholars' limited access to archival materials, or the total absence thereof; Arab culture's disregard for the value of material evidence; an aversion to the political economy that has taken shape since the European renaissance as condemnable (*makrūh*) or unadvisable (*ghayr mandūb*), along with the inability of present-day Islamic movements to formulate an Islamic mode of economic thought; the failure of Arab liberation movements to offer an alternative; and the weakness of those movements' policies, when compared to an excessive focus on political histories tainted with glaring ideological inclinations.

In any case, the rest of the contributions on the subject sought to investigate, in detail or in part, the foregoing arguments as to forms of engagement with Arab historiographies and how their methods have developed under the guiding notions of producing universal histories. The paper on the methodology employed by Kamal Salibi (1929-2011) at various points in his work *The Bible Came from Arabia*, for instance, illustrated Salibi's deployment of the Bible's historical geography and the names of places to prove that the Arabian Peninsula region (i.e., the Hijaz and Yemen) – not Greater Syria and Egypt – was the space that witnessed the foundational events in the cosmic message of the Abrahamic religions. Salibi's methodology, thus, required a good knowledge of unmarked Ancient Hebrew, free of short vowels, for which Arabic served as a reference as the primary living Semitic language, all the while taking account of phonological and orthographical variation to explore the significance of the places mentioned in the Bible, which he regarded as a creation narrative derived from Semitic languages including Hebrew, Arabic, Syriac, and Old Aramaic. These were deciphered using the techniques of substitution and translation.

The product of scrutinising the contributions on Morocco's *nawāzil* corpora and the role of network organisation in strengthening capacities for resistance and mobilisation across the Arab region for Ibādī religious minorities appears to clarify a set of technical and methodological applications. These practises operated at the source of particular corpora that undoubtedly helped broaden the horizons of Arab historical studies, especially on economics and society, beyond excessive focus on the Middle East to acknowledge the importance of scholarship on peripheral regions in formulating an Arab narrative inclined toward the network-building approach. Such a narrative would connect the Ibādī communities in Oman, Zanzibar, the Mashreq, and the Maghreb, whether during the era of the Arab Renaissance and Islamic reformism or the period of Arab unity and decolonisation. The narrative of Arab historical interdependence in language, culture, and religion ought not to be prematurely constructed; instead, this construction should take upon itself the task of crafting a new Arab geography.

Exploring the various chronologies related to crafting the Arab historical narrative through a process that "investigates lost time all over again" involves clarifying how writing Arab history relates to the production of universal history, by taking stock of the profound transformations of Egypt's post-authoritarian temporalities and decoding their relationship to the dualism of history and memory according to the

conceptions Benedict Anderson put forth in *Imagined Communities*. Thus, it was necessary to clarify the roles associated with “synchronous experience”, “representation”, and “the wheel of production” in formulating national affiliations and, thereby, to reveal the Egyptian state’s failure “to produce daily time” and, under Hosni Mubarak, the concentration of its legitimacy within a reprehensible discourse of development while also pushing for engagement in the downward spiral of “remembrance” (p. 203) and revising, or incorrectly remembering, the facts—an alarming truth whose catastrophic nature was uncovered by the revolution when secret archives were opened and documents came to light on the Arab-Israeli wars. As a result, it was necessary to consider the inaccuracy of the official discourse while opening the door to a precarious temporality for political and civil society actors, all of whom had been implicated in the endorsement of deplorable practices under the guise of building and strengthening Arab nation-states.

“Into the Light of Day”: Writing National Narratives and the Impasse of Political Implementation

Papers in this section were geographically distributed between two major regions. The first considers instances from the national histories of Arab Middle East (i.e., Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq), while the second delves into the histories of North African countries (i.e., Tunisia, Morocco, and Mauritania).

Noha Khalaf’s contribution builds on the memoirs of Palestinian journalist Issa El-Issa (1878-1950) and employs a micro-historical approach to reveal understudied aspects of Palestinian history, blending the subjective with the objective and the past with the present. Hence, the micro-analysis being conducted at the intersection of space and time provided the opportunity to fill in the blanks of Palestinian history, especially from the Ottoman era until the foundations of the Zionist state had been laid, covering Ottoman rule of the area and the Great Arab Revolt.

This micro-historical approach to the content of El-Issa’s memoirs demonstrated how the Ottomans gave way to the Zionist movement, supported feudal lords in the seizure of land from peasants, then squandered those lands away by selling them to Zionist immigrants. It further substantiated that the Zionist movement cooperated with Arab regimes during the 1936 Palestinian revolution; that the first generation of political actors were aware of the differences between various Zionist factions during the British Mandate; how the partition plan negatively impacted the peasantry and led them to establish a strong basis for the resistance; and how conservative landowners opposed them in the total absence of a bourgeoisie. These renewed intuitions support the notion that attending to place, memory, community, culture, and identity helps reveal competition and struggle, whether avowed or concealed, between various historical actors, to further understand the reasons behind the failure of the act of resistance in the Palestinian case.

Makkawi discussed the transitions that shaped the historiography of modern Egypt “in orientation, theory, methods, and leadership” beginning with the Egyptian national academy’s shift from the civil to the governmental in 1925. Makkawi investigated the levels of transformation, or transition, in the formulation of historical knowledge and the construction of an epistemological accumulation following the adoption of the individual role in crafting historical action to the relationship of that same production to collective action, corresponding to the materialist interpretation of history espoused by Marxist-influenced leftist historians and, thus, engagement with the dictates of identity in the investigations and explanations of Islamist scholars.

The goal of this process was to clarify the roles of historians amidst the ideological shifts and contextual particularities that guide their academic research. It sought to explain how using such knowledge could serve different cultural and political goals, ultimately leading to the emergence of schools of thought in Egyptian

historical writing. Makkawi acknowledges that examining a) the actions of leaders and officials as catalysts for Egyptian historical development or the contexts of how ruling political regimes were constructed, b) the levers and trajectories of the history of the national movement, and c) the nature of developments within the structure of the historical self has been wholly called into question in the wake of the violent shock of the incidents of early 2011. These events led the younger generations to confront the despotic tendencies of authority, especially through its guardianship over various segments of society, such as the falsification of living memory, the deliberate erasure of records and photographs concerning the events of the revolution, and the concealment of the conditions that preceded the revolution and shaped its access to the truth. It is as if the regime's insistence on invoking nationalist discourse and reproducing the elements of authoritarianism and exclusion only stimulated the younger generations' yearning (and, indeed, their determination) to rid themselves of that legacy and to call openly for a break with its disastrous consequences. Instead, it encouraged a re-reading of Egypt's modern history, free of misinformation and fabrication.

The remaining contributions on the Mashreq region, namely Mohannad Moubaydeen's presentation on Jordan's relationship with national history and Nusair al-Kaabi's work on the shifting contexts for historical writing in Iraq, revealed how historical knowledge is characterised by a state of artificial continuity, or deceptive stagnation in the Jordanian case – a key cause of which appears to be apprehension around the discussion of embarrassing political issues for the ruling Hashemite dynasty and its close allies – even though it has been shown that those histories were constructed in light of the Arab issue or around the question of the coalescence of Jordanian personality and the elevation of the role of the national movement. This historiography has branched out into four institutions working in unison: universities, national committees, research centres, and independent historical studies that tend to be of an avowedly ethical, social character. Yet the volume of research in political history would suggest that historians, with some exceptions, have not been successful in going beyond the officially sanctioned scope to formulate a philosophical or intellectual background reflecting autonomy – to say nothing of engaging critically with the history of the national movement or examining disasters, famines, prisons, disease, and other tangential issues emerging from various modernist and reformist historiographical trends.

Within the same framework comes the section on analysing the contexts and methodological approaches of Iraqi historical writing, seeking to re-evaluate the stereotype of shifts in official ideology that dominate collective action internally, in light of the effect of transitions in the prevailing mode of production for economic management in Iraq on historical knowledge, and considering the plurality of the Western educational backgrounds of the originators of that knowledge externally. Thus, it becomes totally imprecise – in the absence of intellectual accumulation and a modern, merit-based academic culture – for there to be a school of historical thought with the requisite professional specifications and theoretical, authoritative functionality in Iraq, even though historiography has seen several “established modes” which al-Kaabi describes as the “local-national mode”, “Marxist mode”, and “variable modes” such as “Islamic national historiography”, “national history”, “confessional history”, and the “mode of economic-national writing”. All of these patterns discuss “the story of the *umma* and its role in history” while clarifying the contributions of key historical actors by assembling their life courses, in the manner of Abd al-Aziz Duri's *The Historical Formation of the Arab Nation: A Study in Identity and Consciousness*.

The four contributions on the Maghreb region (two on Morocco, one on Tunisia, and one on Mauritania) echoed the same dilemma emerging from various readings of the issues of nation-state narratives and the construction of the foundational narratives of civil and development projects.

Abdelrahim Benhadda presented on three generations of historians and their research areas, such as investigation, monography, and the relational history of the Mashreq, Europe, and Africa, as well as

interrogating Otherness, grappling with contemporary history, and formulating structural accounts while navigating different frameworks and institutions of academic publication and their associated pitfalls in Morocco. That the work of Moroccan historians accounts for nearly a third of knowledge production on Morocco in the social sciences and humanities, his research argues, must not obscure the fragility of this historical knowledge accumulation, given an inability to initiate the next generation of scholars while ensuring the desired research quality and credibility and a decline in scholastic production over the past two decades.

Similarly, Mohammed Habida spoke on the ambiguity of the “pre-colonial” to examine the functions of conceptual divisions of time and potentialities for investigating them from the standpoint of social, economic, and cultural structures. He sought to adapt the concept to the demands of the *longue durée* and its universalist applications, proposing a reassessment of how “pre-colonial” time is deployed, whether by historians or social scientists, and an interrogation of all such studies in light of “contemporary trends in historiography”. After thoroughly analysing the topics of his research, each of which relating to implementations of pre-colonial time, and investigating the use of the concept in the context of the Maghreb countries and the anthropology of their societies, Habida concluded with ways in which the *longue durée* may in turn be employed with respect to bridging the gap between the Middle Ages and the modern era to better understand the history of the southwestern bank of the Mediterranean (Morocco in particular) until the French occupation of Algeria in 1830. This result corresponded with Fernand Braudel’s assertion, echoing Edmond Faral, that fear of the long-term perspective is what truly damages this history.

Although Fatima Ben Soliman offered a complementary view on this question in her paper, entitled “The Nation-State in Modern Tunisian Historiography”, it was her reliance on the methodological approaches of “subaltern studies”, as well as the methods of Ottoman Studies specialists within “postcolonial studies”, that led her to the shift in historical approaches to the state and to issues of identity, citizenship, democracy, and development in Tunisia. The study of these questions in the wake of colonisation investigated a paradigmatic shift in perspective and interpretation by which it became possible to move beyond the first generation of Tunisian historians’ view of the state as a complete entity and the source of all action or supposed transformation toward incorporating its various initiatives within an intricate network of historical actors, as proposed by the research of scholars of later generations.

Ben Soliman situated her epistemological assessment and methodological insights toward all imported trends within an enquiry as to the contexts in which the first generation of historians – whom she described as “obsessed” with “the state concept” – examined what she termed “the archaeology of the Tunisian nation-state”; these scholars understood the state as a system of violence and domination, the product of an imported modernity, the foundation of a local hereditary dynasty, and, thus, the effusion of a self-sufficient “nation” emerging from the Ottoman Caliphate/Empire. She concluded, conversely, by situating this ongoing epistemological shift within the transformations of social history, which has addressed the history of the state from within and diversified methodologies to attribute all readings of Tunisian state formation to a “ceiling” that renders that state inseparable from how its modern history, in all its dynamism, relates to its legal status as a province of the Ottoman Empire/Caliphate.

This very trend ran contrary to the many studies of Abdeljelil Temimi, later deepened through the work of Asma Moalla and Leila Blili. Its internal structure has been deconstructed through research on the roles associated with various actors within the governing apparatus such as central and local aides, slaves, wives, concubines, and relatives, pending an expansion of that tendency through the comparison of state formation in Tunisia to that of the other Arab provinces during the Ottoman period.

However, the deductions of Hamahoullah Ould Salem’s contribution as to what he dubbed “the crisis of national history in Mauritania” bring us back to square one regarding the agitation of pre-state tribal and

regional institutions against all other parties, thereby consecrating a “fragile national identity” emanating from the simultaneous crises of a) the state project, b) its historiography, and c) the accumulation of objective knowledge on the state. Such a blight afflicting historical knowledge has, in truth, expanded to afflict all narratives put forth on state formation and the coalescence of the national self in Africa or the Maghreb region, to such an extent that ibn Khaldūn himself has nearly become the subject of a territorial dispute among these countries. Ould Salem’s paper examined the literature on the periods of Mauritanian national history, making note of Arab and local sources, contemporary schools of thought, and challenges to writing that history, foremost among which being the legacy of French colonial sociology; the completion of school curricula, structural works, and university theses; and the negligence afflicting political-ideological narratives. As well, the author considered the difficulties of crafting collective identity, managing land borders and tribal authority, to say nothing of cultural sensitivities around Arabisation and the Blackness of those whom Herodotus dubbed “the ones with burnt faces”, the dilemma of local history, and other stumbling blocks. Broadly speaking, this would indicate the failure of the nation-state project and the incompetence of its institutions in managing tribal and familial histories, which is cause for a swift reconditioning of national cultural norms to construct a rational national consciousness around true historical issues and a national history that “permits balance between the particular and the universal, the territorial and the national”(p. 524).

In any case, historical research on the making of transitional experiences toward nationalising modern territorial vocabulary and post-colonial nationalism – despite the critical detail and variation they have provided these historical contexts – still need to closely engage with the experiences of other modern Arab political entities in Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf, and the rest of the Arab countries (e.g., Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Algeria). It is useful when evaluating phenomena under study, in a manner equitable toward historical contexts, to consider the transformations these cases witnessed, to compare them to one another, and to examine fluctuations within Arab processes of modernisation – whether by expounding on modern civic tendencies or by pulling experiences of political and territorial centralisation toward conservative perceptions of a pan-Arabist or Salafi persuasion.

Knowledge Accumulation in Arab Comparative Histories, or the “Poor Relative”

The volume also includes research on collective impact that takes pause at the issue of knowledge accumulation on Arab comparative histories. Five contributions from Samer Akkach, Ezzeddine Djessous, Saleh Alwany, Tariq Madani, and the late Mohamed Tahar Mansouri explored the potential to develop these histories and identified some key studies in the field.

These studies addressed an array of new questions posed by the historiography of science in the Arab world, in line with the shift in how Western historians have examined the issue. Three studies evaluated the outcomes of historiography on the “Islamic West” and/or “North Africa” and the ways in which ibn Khaldūn’s thought has inspired the crafting of this region’s history, past and present, as well as the evolution of research on the history of al-Andalus and its position within Arab and Western scholarship. The remaining two contributions sought to highlight the import of this research, by way of lexicography, in the depiction of the Byzantines within Arab heritage and civilisation.

If it has been conclusively shown that motives for Arab engagement with the history of science have transcended responding to the Western narrative’s disregard for Arab scientific and creative contributions, then the West’s awareness of the gaps in this reading, even its acknowledgement of negligence and modification of methodologies to emphasise the Arabs’ important role in scientific development, is what

obliges a move beyond stereotypical interpretations, restricted to traditional points of contention, in the present. The objective would be to craft a new narrative of the history of science, free of impressionistic rebuttals and the many shades of Western supremacy that have characterised this research and manifested within the structures of Western scientific production through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; in particular, Western historical research has closely documented the role of Eastern peoples in the development of knowledge, specifically Arab-Islamic advancements in mathematics and astronomy. Yet “the documentation of scientific information is one thing, and the way it is deployed in the historiography of science is another” (p. 633).

The irony here is that opposition to the marginalisation of the Arab role in universal scientific production has resulted, conversely, in that role’s hasty confinement to the medieval period. Hence, Arab historians of science ought to comparatively address the post-Copernican stage to situate the evolving intellectual position of the Arabs within the course of scientific development and to construct an Arab narrative that clarifies the true causes, following the shift driven by the discovery of the Earth’s location within the solar system, of the accelerated realisation of a Western scientific revolution while the same key development met with apathy within the Arab-Islamic intellectual sphere. Further, one must take care to avoid falling into impressionistic justifications that serve none other than a narcissistic, Western reading of history, as well as the Salafi viewpoint that rejects the notion of a Western scientific revolution, and to instead focus on the concept of “acquisition” rather than “borrowing”: something that came to the Arabs’ aid when their civilisation flourished in the transmission and acquisition of knowledge from previous civilisations, without regard for the identity of its producers.

This point draws particular support from the studies that have elucidated the depiction of the Byzantines in the Arabic language throughout the medieval period, profoundly and meaningfully substantiating the transmission and fusion of the Greek language within the lexicon of Arabic, as if the former were the product of the latter. What is interesting is that the search for alternatives or parallels – whether to bring the Byzantine experience within the scope of an Arab mentality, to Arabise its terminology, or to incorporate these terms into Arabic directly – coincided with the spread of Greek Orthodox communities across the Islamic world and the emergence of close ties between the two groups. These relations served as the foundation for the abundance of Greek terminology in the Arabic lexicon, whether in general nomenclature, political institutions (e.g., central government and empire), military institutions, proper nouns, and religious and financial terms – broadening knowledge, strengthening an atmosphere of curiosity, and aiming to better understand aspects of the Christian Other, like Banū al-Aṣfār (the Romans), as evoked by the Arab proverb: “he who learns the language of a people shall be safe from their iniquity” (*man ta ‘allama lughata qawmin amina sharrahum*).

Contributions that addressed the methodology of historical approaches to the Maghrebi-Andalusian sphere sought to scrutinise their conclusions and the extent to which researchers were under the influence of Western Orientalism during the colonial presence, and to clarify the levels by which these studies departed from this inept approach by considering developments across historical periods, especially the Islamic era. This objective involved the consultation of many Arabic-language corpora touching on different trends in religious thought, revealing an aversion on part of Western scholars to delve into these sources and, indeed, a failure to intellectually engage therewith in order to broaden their understandings and historical horizons on the subject – something very surprising, especially given that the pretext of having a limited command of the Arabic language would not necessarily contradict taking care to examine what has been written and to make use of its considerable accumulation. Rather, to do so would promote the movement of ideas and the enrichment of scientific production across both shores of the Mediterranean.

Literature reviews of research on the history of the Maghreb countries since decolonisation have elucidated this very point, examining the extent to which these studies adopted Western approaches tinged with blatant Orientalist inclinations given an inability to overcome the ideological difficulties of national narratives. This has been an assessment which is neither serious nor in many cases precise. According to the same studies, the conditions for progression, or salvation, lie in re-reading ibn Khaldūn's corpus (viz. *al-Muqaddima*, *al-'Ibar*, *al-Riḥla*, and *Shifā' al-Sā'il*) in light of the concerns of the Annales schools, especially the methodological research of Marc Bloch as to the critical importance of modifying temporal metrics and examining natural, cultural, and social structures, before shifting focus to the investigation of events as soon as they take on the distinctive vocabulary of the philosophy of history. All these are conceptions that, despite their originality, appear unfair to historical eras, pushing for the interpretation of this vast body of work on the foundations of universal historical knowledge so as to address matters its proponents had never considered.

We observe a similar trend in research on the history of al-Andalus: a space of convergence between East and West which has long suffered a pathological deification of its past, transforming it into a kind of myth that detracts from its history and brings its inclusive portrayal into a dubious space that has bolstered the effect of memory and the representative. This means that knowledge production stemming from research on the history of al-Andalus, from East and West alike, has not been without its flaws, whether with respect to defining concepts (e.g., Muslim Spain, al-Andalus, *la Reconquista*, Eastern despotism, and the question of ethnic origin) or departing from the notion of a lost "paradise" in favour of alternative lines of questioning that would put a stop to impressionistic reactions that distort reality. In this way, researching the history of al-Andalus would become "worthy of consideration in and of itself, not for what it is supposed to be" (p. 707). Especially after the collapse of Francisco Franco's dictatorship in 1975, historical knowledge on Andalusian-era Spain has made important progress toward candidness and self-reconciliation in line with the dictates of openness, and to strengthen cultural pluralism and democratisation.

It has become clear that these studies in comparative history have concentrated on cases of Otherness that depart from the civilisational context or geographical particularities. Methodologically, they have not addressed points of consensus and contention with respect to horizontal, not vertical, correspondence, as if to affiliate with the same nominal-political, cultural, or civilisational space is to exempt oneself from the representation of differences within the unified Arab field's various structures, as a way to manage their particularities and illustrate their courses through a comparative reading.

Forms of Interpreting the Representative in Arab Histories

This final section, devoted to interpreting the historical representative, included nine contributions that fall under two categories. The first sought to address corpora of mythical tales (Yahia Boulahia), hierarchies of the First Companions of the Prophet (Mohammed Hamza), foundational biographies (Abdullah Ali Ibrahim), and popular biographies (Amr Mounir and Abdelaziz Labib) by interpreting texts and the contexts of their production. These efforts came as an attempt to bring the construction of historical reports back within the scope of mental representations, rooted in the deep permeation of memory within the individual and collective imaginary of their historical personalities and their true origin and belonging. The remaining contributions evaluated the relationship of memory to history and the historiographical modes of intellectual concepts, or representations, within the experiences of Morocco (Abdulaziz al-Taheri), Algeria (Massoud Doulaymi), and Sudan (Mahasen AbdulJalil). The book concludes by assessing the academic level of knowledge production in historical anthropology and closely inspecting topics addressed by university historians in the Algerian journal *Insaniyat* (Abdelwahad al-Makani).

The presence of memory in the work of Moroccan historians has benefitted from specific contexts to open the door to political and social freedoms and the implementation of transitional justice on part of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission since the turn of the century. There has also been an increase in social demand for histories like these, particularly in reference to the recent past (i.e., colonialism) and the current past (i.e., independence) rather than earlier historical periods. Hence, such an approach should be firmly implemented and expanded to cover previous historical periods by interrogating traditional, colonial, and national historiographies, evaluating academic research from universities, and relating that to contemporary history via the relationship between eyewitness and historian. In this way, one may clarify the divisions between selective emotional, impressionistic, and mythical representations of memory in comparison with attempts by historiography to rationalise and critique the past.

The situation does not greatly differ in relation to evaluating the ambiguous relationship of historical knowledge on Algeria to the problems of reviving memory and the negligence, even deceit, afflicting the scholarship – whether over the long period of colonisation or through the output of academic institutions following the state's independence – let alone the various attempts to manipulate history and deploy it for ideological purposes before there came to be greater openness, protection of academic freedoms, and a critical re-evaluation of scholarship, whether by Algerian researchers or otherwise, on Algerian history since the 1990s.

Building on this was the invocation of what has been termed “the historical anthropology turn” within the Moroccan context, and the historiographical shift from “hot” content related to “resistance, revolutions, and liberation movements” to “cold” content based on “patterns and mentalities more than personalities, turning points, and events” (p. 997). The evaluation process revolved around studying the “anthropological turn” and interacting with its archives, methods, and paradigms concerning questions of Sufism (i.e., an area where scholars employing a comparative approach have gone conspicuously unmentioned), family, blights, endemics, famines, and how all of that relates to plant nutrition. Meanwhile, positional analysis has aimed to evaluate the contents of the Algerian periodical *Insaniyat*, published regularly since 1997 – as a complement to its Tunisian and Moroccan counterparts *IBLA* (since 1937) and *Hespress* (since 1927), respectively – while applying some conclusions from the Maghreb region to the Mashreq, to promote the development of that critical turn toward improved research on “historical and comparative periods, the relationship of the local to the central and of the territorial to the national [...], and renewing research models by intensifying the interrogation of the familiar or static [of a given subject]” (p. 1015).

It is not unlikely that clarifying the issue of “suppressed history” – a blatant licence to obscure, distort, and erase – could represent an innovative and courageous attempt to strengthen extant scholarship on the history of insanity, history of slavery, and relationships following both by connecting this research to the representative, denial, social neglect, suppression, the emergence of “taboos” and their resilience to being dissolved or transcended, and how all of this relates to the history of sexuality, gender, and re-integration. Such an elucidation would deconstruct relationships of renunciation, marginalisation, and exclusion, and it would expand on excavations in the “archaeology” of historical knowledge in order to gather documentation on the history of the suppressed in Sudan and open its archives; examine memoirs, personal letters, oral interviews, and field research; then extract and interrogate their contents regarding the meanings of suppression and how they relate to history, especially that of insanity and slavery (overseas and at home; as an imposition upon the body and a kind of destiny). In doing so, one may better understand the congruence of that history with subjective and social history; its having spread through memory within the oral record; and the dramatization, intensification, and complication of news to the point that historians now need “to update their tools and devise new ones” to overcome the challenges of constructing historical knowledge (p. 922).

However, what separates myth from history? How might mythology be of use in crafting historical facts? What are the boundaries between Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, Edgar Morin's epistemology, and Maurice Halbwachs' collective memory? How might we employ new methods (anthropology in particular) when reading these studies? What justifications are there for studying Andalusian mythology (especially the myth of the House of Wisdom) alongside its innovative counterparts concerning the Japanese Amaterasu as a way to capture positive, foundational moments of development when re-reading history and avoiding deep-seated traps within our collective memory? These were the essential questions driving the remaining studies, which investigated the stories of the First Companions or analysed the representative within folktales about the "Conquests of Egypt" or the "Epic of Banū Hilāl" as mythically-charged events and the controversy they elicited as retrospective depictions of the Islamic Age. Further, these studies considered how the depictions constructed fixed standards and values by cleansing collective ethics of political interests and addressed problematic texts on ethnic groups and fringe communities (i.e., those of mixed pan-Arab and pan-African roots) and the capacity for conflict resolution as a "cultural climate" and a "historical event": one that permits the writing of an "alternative history" by way of "marginal testimonies diverging from mainstream interpretations that celebrate the world of the collective, with its strange tales and the madness of its poets" (p. 991).

There has undoubtedly been a diversity in the works of Arab historians that, during nation-state formation and decolonisation, broke with dimensions of recreation or classical immersion in historiography, even though this content has been affected by Western methodological schools. The contributions to this volume on Arab historiography and the history of the Arabs has offered a valuable opportunity to assess the intellectual accumulation in the discipline across four themes. The first two related to contextual concerns that suggest the reconsideration of the nominal eras of Western history, and the extent to which Arab historical knowledge engages with universalist conceptions intrinsic to knowledge production. Themes also included assessing the challenges of research on national issues as independent from hegemonic official narratives with bias to nation-state projects, or of studies detached from those narratives and based instead on pan-Arabist or Salafi-Islamist conceptions, whether explicit or implicit. The rest of the contributions investigated the stability of horizontal comparative histories of Arab countries, as well as aspects related to archaeology, heritage, or anthropo-history by approaching the complex relationships that connect memory to history. The content and methodological inclinations of all of these themes were productively evaluated in a manner that scholars of Arab history may find useful when diversifying and developing historiographical methods, and in addressing the question of comparative history in the manner of the early Annales school and its scholarship on Europe, ever since the publication of Marc Bloch's seminal essay on historical methodology in the early twentieth century.