

Chapter 1

Middle Eastern Societies and Ordinary People's Lives

Rethinking Middle Eastern History

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Despite a great deal of useful research on the histories of modern Middle Eastern societies, we know little of the lives of ordinary Middle Eastern men and women. Instead, we see the Middle East over the shoulders of diplomats, military officers, entrepreneurs, and bureaucrats. This essentially elite perspective has focused on the “big story”: the coming to modernity of Middle Eastern states and societies, and the operation of large-scale historical forces. In the process, the perspectives of those who were on the receiving end of these changes have generally been neglected.

As a result, we tend to see the fate of the Middle East, or of Islamic societies, as determined by one or another impersonal historical force whose operation was decisive. For some authors, this force is religion; for others, capitalism, imperialism, oriental despotism, or economic dependency. These views, despite their often contradictory explanations of the main-springs of change, have portrayed Middle Easterners as marionettes in a historical drama not of their devising, rather than as flesh-and-blood individuals with some capacity to affect their own life chances. Deprived of agency, they have become what Eric Wolf calls “peoples without history.”¹

Often unexamined, these determinisms still govern the way most of us think about the Middle East. However, they fail to take account of the complex historical processes, structural forms, and cultural patterns that have shaped the context within which individuals have lived. Instead, they provide us with a kind of just-so story (or rather a series of often conflicting just-so stories). By privileging particular groups' understanding of the past, such views have skewed our sense of how that past actually came about, and have simultaneously delegitimized the self-understanding of other groups.

Politics, however, was not always or invariably the determining factor in most people's lives, and the ups and downs of the economic roller coaster

affected different people in different ways. No one schema can make sense of the quite varied historical experiences covered in this book: those of Middle Easterners from Morocco to Afghanistan, and from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present.

Instead of starting from broad generalizations about Islam or the Ottoman state, or from stereotypes about the Arab mind or Islam, a rereading of the history of the Middle East should put the experiences of ordinary men and women at its center. This new kind of history would begin with the notion that different ecologies, ways of life, and ethnic, class, and gender situations shaped individual possibilities of action. The biographies of ordinary Middle Eastern men and women in this book provide a series of vantage points from which to undertake such a rereading. (Below, we reflect on the nature of such a rereading, based on the contributions in this book.)

This book focuses on the biographies of ordinary people rather than on the lives of officials, military officers, and intellectuals. By “ordinary people” we mean the “peoples without history”—which includes non-elite men and most women (for example, tribal elite women), namely, those whose experiences have generally been left out of the history books. This is not to say that the individuals whose lives are chronicled here are ordinary. The very fact that enough information exists about them to make possible a brief biography makes them, by definition, extraordinary. As we will soon see, some of those whose lives are chronicled here were of humble origins and later moved up in the social pecking order, or became well known locally for one or another reason. Others started and remained artisans, peasants, and tribespeople and might have remained unknown but for a chance event—the opening of an official file, an encounter with an anthropologist, the desire of a descendant to explore the family tree.

A question that may arise concerns the extent to which the biographies included in this volume can be seen as typical of Middle Easterners. Despite an energetic effort to cast the net as widely as possible, not all groups are represented within these pages. Given the ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity of the region, a comprehensive inclusiveness—a kind of Noah’s Ark principle of coverage—is quite impossible. Rather, the not entirely random selection of biographies provides a set of core samples aimed at helping us understand the transformations that Middle Eastern societies have undergone since the beginning of the nineteenth century. They spotlight the dynamism of Middle Eastern men and women, as well as their attachment to old ways of doing things. At a time when the Middle East is often harshly caricatured in Western society, these portraits of ordinary men and women and their struggles and attempts to survive in a context of great uncertainty and risk serve to assert our common humanity. The sheer variety of so broad a historical and geographical sample also suggests the need to rethink much of the conventional wisdom about Middle Eastern

society. In this sense, we hope that the present volume is not an end but a beginning.

To provide a framework for readers lacking a knowledge of the histories of particular Middle Eastern societies, this book is organized chronologically. Other arrangements (geographical or regional or by gender, class, or way of life) can, however, be imagined, and the reader is encouraged to develop his or her own alternative thematic or regional focus. (For example, one might wish to group the biographies of peasants, North Africans, women, or minorities.) To promote alternative foci, each chapter is preceded by a brief introduction by the editors. The chapter introductions have two purposes: to provide a historical, political, and methodological context for the essay in question, and to suggest connections with some of the other selections.

Given the uneven impact of change between and within modern Middle Eastern societies from Morocco to Afghanistan, the chronological structure of the book should be taken as a set of floating benchmarks, not a fixed Procrustean scheme. Its purpose is to draw attention to what is similar in the historical experiences of the different societies of the area, not to argue for a particular, unilinear sequence of causality. The specific pace of change varied from place to place and mattered crucially both for ordinary people and for the particular outcomes in particular places. The arrangement of the chapters in this volume has been shaped by these considerations.

Middle Eastern men and women responded to often difficult circumstances in different ways. Struggle was one dimension of their individual stories: defiance of the guild master, the cruel government official, the "system" in all its manifestations. Such efforts were by their very nature uncommon, for those in power possessed not only superior force but also (even under colonialism) a measure of cultural hegemony—what Eugene Genovese in another context has referred to as "invisible shackles of the mind."² Some of the individuals we will encounter in these pages were nonetheless heroes of a sort. But (as we will see) even anticolonial resistance was not an unalloyed impulse. Rather, it could, and did, often mask the settling of old scores, the chance for quick gain. (To study the roots of nationalism through the lives of ordinary people is to encounter the density and confusion of micropolitics, where moral choices were not always clear and options not unlimited.) Moreover, seen in one way a strategy of resistance might seem heroic, when from another optic it could seem quixotic. When we look at the successive strategies of an individual's entire life, coherence is hard to find.

More common was the tenacious and often courageous effort of common folk to hang in there, to survive against all odds. Rascals and scoundrels might prove better survivors for a time, but the operation of the wheel of fortune did not permit many to escape from misfortune for long.

The possibilities for individual action derived in part from the social cards an individual was dealt at birth (gender, class, and ethnicity foremost among them). But they were also determined by personal character and chance. Struggle and survival, then, are not exclusive, mutually contradictory categories, but dimensions within a field of power in which the terms are constantly shifting over time.

Part 1, titled “Precolonial Lives,” contains biographies of individuals whose lives were largely untouched by the shadow of the West. Most, but not all, of them lived in the period from 1850 to World War I. Their existence was shaped by the structures of the old society: artisan guilds, kinship groups, ethnic communities. Although already in the throes of change when the nineteenth century began, as several examples show, these structures proved remarkably resilient. They also provided considerable resources for resistance and accommodation to change.

Part 2, “Colonial Lives,” contains essays about persons whose lives were primarily shaped by the experiences of nationalism and colonialism.³ Because the chronology of European rule differed from country to country within the region as a whole,⁴ this section includes individuals who lived in the nineteenth as well as the twentieth century. The colonial encounter was complex and affected people differently depending upon their specific situations. Some were able to trade upon their skills and connections to advance their personal and family fortunes. Others, less favorably situated, found the going rough. Navigating in the constantly shifting political and economic tides presented tricky problems to all.

In Part 3, “Postcolonial Lives,” we encounter Middle Easterners who came to maturity after World War II. Shaped by the harsher realities of nationalist and Islamic movements, the boom-and-bust cycles of the world oil market, wars, civil strife, and foreign occupation, individuals who came to maturity in this period had substantially different experiences than their parents and grandparents. Taken together, they give us a portrait, incomplete it is true, of some of the ways people have tried to cope with the dizzying transformations of the postwar era.

Part 4, “Contemporary Lives,” introduces us to individuals whose lives have been shaped by recent events, including the 1990–91 Gulf War, which begins our period, and the recent U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, which conclude it. The phase of history that began with the events of September 11, 2001, of course, is not over. So our periodization therefore can only be regarded as an interim marking of historical terrain that is largely uncharted. The attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon did not spring from a historical void but had deep roots in the postwar legacy of U.S. involvement in the region and the manifest incompetencies of Middle Eastern leaders. Thus, the events of 9/11 are to be understood not as a beginning but as a rising to the surface of trends already visible in the pre-

vious period. Similarly, the events of 9/11 are not in any sense to be understood as an end point to what had preceded. The forces of economic globalization, demographic increase, and political repression that we have already observed in the postcolonial period continue unabated. In this context, pious hopes for democratization appear implausible, or destabilizing if fulfilled. One thing we can say is that the lives of Americans and Middle Easterners, already interlinked by migration and trade, will be increasingly interwoven for the foreseeable future, whether for good or ill. The biographies in part 4 make us wonder whether the issue is “Why do they hate us?” or instead “What have we done to so enrage them?” It is vitally important for Americans to understand the human context in which Middle Easterners struggle to survive.

SOCIAL BIOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL THEORY

In a sense, this volume brings the field of Middle Eastern history full circle. Biography gave an early impetus to the writing of Islamic history, largely because of the central place in Islamic piety and scholarship occupied by the figure of Muhammad. The need for information about his life, seen by Muslims as a model of correct behavior, spawned a host of biographies. The most famous, Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat rasul Allah* (c. 809 C.E.), quickly acquired canonical status. For information about Muhammad, Muslims looked not only to the Quran but also to the living memory of the community. Eventually, these traditions, called *hadith* reports, were collected and written down. Over time, the Quran and *hadith* reports came to form the basis of Islamic law, the Sharia.⁵

The need to distinguish reliable *hadith* reports from pious legend provided a second impulse to the writing of biography. This took the form of a new genre of Islamic scholarship known as *tabaqat*, which contained biographies of the first generations of Muslims that focused on their ethical character and, hence, reliability as transmitters of *hadith* reports.⁶ Later, *tabaqat* came to include not just the lives of the early companions of the Prophet but also of Islamic scholars (*ulama*), Sufi mystics, and notables (*ayan*) of particular cities. The *tabaqat* literature is voluminous, and more continues to be produced to this day. While *tabaqat* writings lack much that we would recognize as biography (including a sense of individual psychology), their focus on the person provides a valuable source for social history, especially for prosopography (group biography).⁷ Of course, biography provided only one of the sources for Islamic history writing. Other sources included pre-Islamic Arabian tribal sagas and imperial chronicles (the best-known example of which is the monumental *History* of Tabari).⁸

In the West, biography is a well-established genre, though until recently a disfavored one in historical writing. Because it is a primary site for explor-

ing the connections of social and cultural processes, biography has grown in importance if anything in recent times. Some exemplary histories that utilize biography in this way include Natalie Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*, and Jonathan Spence's *The Death of Woman Wang*.⁹

There has been a resurgence of interest in biography in the social sciences as well, notably in anthropology and sociology. In anthropology, where the relationship of the anthropologist to his or her indigenous collaborator has been a constant incitement to "read" the culture through the life of the informant, the genre has been well established since Franz Boas.¹⁰ Recently, anthropologists have begun to acknowledge the role of their informants in their work, and to recognize that anthropological knowledge by its nature is a joint product reflecting the field situation.¹¹ In sociology, too, biography may now once again be coming to the fore, against the background of the statistical modeling that has become increasingly typical in that discipline. This move represents a renewal of an earlier tradition embodied in such classics as Eliott Liebow's *Tally's Corner*.¹²

Because social theories tend to be partial rather than totalizing (focusing, for example, on political or economic behavior), while real lives sprawl in their sheer exuberance across conventional categories, the patterns of individual lives elude even the best theories. The biographical approach holds out the promise of reinvigorating the relationship between social theory and empirical research. The credibility of biographies comes from the concrete details they convey about a particular life and how it was lived. The more accounts of lives we have, the better we will be able to assess their typicality and to understand individual survival strategies. It is because biography can provide fundamental insights into social and cultural processes that it was privileged by Wilhelm Dilthey and his followers.¹³

We use the term *social biography* to refer to the use of biography to explore the complex ways in which individuals navigate amidst social structures, processes, and cultural interactions. Social biography can be distinguished from literary biography, which tends to center upon the inner world or psychology of the subject and its relationship to the dynamics of the life of the individual.¹⁴ Social biographies, especially when deployed as part of a broader research strategy, can test and refine social theories, as well as provide an alternative vantage point from which to think about the historical processes by which societies have been continually transformed.

Since World War II, growing epistemological self-consciousness has made us aware of the ways in which language structures the ways that we think about the world. Much of the heightened awareness focuses on the act of writing in the production of social scientific knowledge.¹⁵ Literary and scientific activities are not as distinct as previously thought. Both are primarily interpretive and focus on the analysis and the production of texts

(whether literary or social). Cultural interpretation and social scientific knowledge in general are inextricably connected to the specific rhetorical envelope in which they are conveyed.¹⁶ Put more directly, there is no easily discoverable distinction between literature and social science. The facts are not separable from their literary embodiment. Rather, their very “factness” derives from the way in which they are related.

What are the implications of these reflections for the biographies in this volume? First, we must recognize that the essays in this volume are *stories*. They seek to make sense of the life of a single individual or related individuals. As stories (some more self-conscious than others) they *represent* to us the experience of people whose culture differs from our own. This they do on the basis of information gathered from historical documents, or from the fading memories of family members and anthropological informants, or from both together. Like all good stories, their narratives are designed to lead the reader to have a degree of empathy and understanding for the main characters. Their manner of doing so, however, varies considerably.

To recognize that biographies are manifestly literary products as well as products of the historical/sociological imagination is not to discount their truth value, but only to qualify it. Like all other exercises in the human sciences, social biographies are constrained by the ways language struggles to mediate between that which is observed and that which is experienced, knowing that the gap is not fully bridgeable because the “factness” of what is seen is always potentially debatable, contingent, and partial. The point is not that anything goes, but that history has only the sense we give to it, and that sense necessarily changes along with the world we live in.¹⁷

While we have acquired a vast amount of knowledge about the Middle East and its diverse peoples, that knowledge tends not to be reflected in the stereotypical images of the region current in the West. Each major political development in the Middle East is confidently analyzed by self-proclaimed experts as demonstrating the existence of a supposedly perennial “Muslim fanaticism,” the unchanging nature of the “Arab mind,” or the pulse of the “Arab street.” The contrast between the knowledge that has been accumulated and the persistent racist nonsense about Middle Eastern people is striking.

Since the appearance of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*,¹⁸ we have become aware of the ways in which Western representations of Middle Eastern culture have been intertwined with the fact of European dominance of the area. Orientalism was a discipline that studied Asian civilizations through an examination of their allegedly characteristic cultural products (the Quran or other texts). By privileging certain texts as the sole authoritative sources of religious and cultural norms and neglecting others that qualify or contradict them, orientalists claimed to provide an explanation for Muslim behavior valid for all times and places.

The intersecting series of more or less connected cultural stereotypes about Islam and Middle Easterners can be called the colonial gospel. In it, Middle Easterners are represented as congenitally fatalistic, fanatical, cowardly, treacherous, despotic, sexually repressed, and patriarchal (among other things).¹⁹ The colonial gospel constitutes an ever-present reservoir of stereotypes of the Middle Eastern “other” that purports to explain why “they” differ from “us.”²⁰ Indeed, it undergirds the political language of the post-9/11 era, based upon the supposed existence of a “clash of civilizations,” to which the biographies in this volume provide the most eloquent response.

Biographies of Middle Easterners have helped to disseminate these popular images. They play an important role in shaping Daniel Lerner’s *Passing of Traditional Societies*, a classic of 1950s modernization theory in which the stereotypical biographies of the Grocer and the Chief serve as a central organizing motif.²¹ Another example is Richard Critchfield’s widely read *Shahhat: An Egyptian*,²² which through the portrait of an allegedly typical peasant seeks to represent all Egyptian peasants. Shahhat, the subject of this study, is a quarrelsome, superstitious youth whose personality traits nicely conform to standard Western cultural stereotypes about shiftless Egyptian peasants. A recent critical review has suggested that there are particular reasons to distrust this work.²³ Whatever the circumstances of its preparation, what interests me about Critchfield’s account in the present context is the way in which it recycles the colonial image of Egyptians.

Because the complexities of the area are so daunting, it is tempting to read Middle Eastern society through the lives of a few individuals. A homogenized and essentialist Middle East enables us to avoid engaging the historical and cultural specificities of the various groups and peoples who live there. Cultural stereotypes, by contrast, enable us to attain a misleading mastery. When those stereotypes also reinforce our sense of cultural superiority, they may well appear irresistible. There is, therefore, reason for reflection—reading the society through the lives of a few supposedly typical individuals is ultimately a quixotic venture.

How then to avoid falling into this trap? It is important to be wary of explanations that invoke allegedly innate psychological traits, such as “the Arab mind,” “the fatalism of the Egyptian peasant,” and the like, in place of a more historically grounded examination. While for some it may seem satisfying to view the turbulent politics of the Middle East as deriving from “tribes with flags,”²⁴ it is well to question such essentialist metaphors closely if we would seek a deeper understanding. More successful works, such as Roy Mottahedeh’s portrait of an Iranian *mullah* in *The Mantle of the Prophet* or Erika Friedl’s *Women of Deh Koh*,²⁵ locate their subjects in particular sociological and cultural, as well as historical, contexts, and do not invoke broad psychological or cultural traits in explanation. They are social biographies

in their commitment to change and complexity, as well as to the individuality of their subjects.²⁶

By their sheer variety, the twenty-four lives presented in this book constitute a potent antidote to the homogenizing and essentialist impulse. While different themes can be traced in these biographies, no one of them applies to all cases. The absolute diversity of the lives works to undermine the “verities” of the colonial vulgate. The very number of lives is an incitement to thought, for one is compelled to consider the particular factors that appear to have been significant in shaping the individual lives recounted here and to locate them in a complex and historical context. Different sources, authorial viewpoints, and connections to the subject also work to undermine efforts to extract a particular theme or lesson about Arabs, Muslims, or Middle Easterners that can apply to all experiences.

So many different cases provide the opportunity to ask some interesting questions about the impact of change and how particular groups and individuals responded. How much were women or tribespeople or villagers (to select a few examples) influenced by the particular social and cultural environments in which they existed? How important were family and patron/client connections in providing access to crucial resources? How did the modernization of society affect the life chances of particular individuals? How important was individual personality or historical conjuncture?

The biographies included here allow us to refine our understanding of how particular groups were affected by large-scale historical processes like Ottoman modernization, European colonialism, and nationalism. In this way, we can begin to develop a new understanding of the history of the region keyed to gender, ethnicity, religion, class, ecology, and way of life. In the remainder of this chapter, we explore how the history of the Middle East might be rethought from the vantage point of the ordinary people whose lives are described in this book.

MIDDLE EASTERN HISTORY AND THE EXPERIENCE OF ORDINARY PEOPLE

Precolonial Lives

The lives of the men and women we encounter in part 1 were shaped by the urban and agrarian structures of the Ottoman Empire and the Iranian and Moroccan monarchies. Their identities derived from their family, occupation, and religion (for some, tribal affiliation was also important) rather than from their nationality or class position. Most nineteenth-century Middle Easterners expected to contend with adversity and cyclical change. But few could have imagined the extent to which their world would be altered by far-reaching forces of social change persisting over time.

Essentially, the changes they confronted were of three sorts: (1) the Ottoman *tanzimat* reforms, (2) the incorporation of the Middle East into the world economy, and (3) the growing power of the West. Each type of change had consequences that affected not just the state but also the society and individuals, opening options for some and closing them off for others. In the process, old social groups and old ways of doing things were supplemented and eventually supplanted by new classes and new ways of behaving.

Since we sometimes tend to forget that many of the chief features of the contemporary Middle East are of recent origin, it is important to add that these changes affected different groups at different rates, and some regions more than others. Until 1880, neither nationalism nor Western power, both of which were significantly to mark the region in the twentieth century, was as yet a dominant factor outside of the Balkan provinces of the Ottoman Empire. This is not to suggest that premodern Middle Eastern society was static and unchanging, as has sometimes been proposed. Nor were the old structures so oppressive as to exclude even relatively poor and powerless individuals from the possibility of some modest social mobility.

The main sources of disruption of people's lives during the nineteenth century were the *tanzimat* reforms and the incorporation of the Middle East into the world economy. Everyday life was gradually remade in response to the outcomes of the struggles around the expanding role of the state, which was the most visible source of change to contemporaries. The encroachment of the *tanzimat* reforms upon the traditional liberties of urban quarters and villages provoked opposition, migration, and accommodation. While some sought to ride the waves of change, others tried to ride them out in the interstices of the society.

By following the differential impact of the *tanzimat* reforms on different groups in Ottoman society, it is possible to gain a different perspective on them. On the level of the elite, the attempt by nineteenth-century Ottoman reformers to build a modern army, a modern bureaucracy, and a modern system of education was opposed by powerful vested interests. Most important were the janissaries, court officials, and *ulama* of the old regime. For the janissaries, the *tanzimat* reforms were a calamity. They were brutally eliminated in a series of purges. Court officials and *ulama* who opposed the reforms were marginalized, but supporters prospered.²⁷

The impact of the *tanzimat* reforms on local and provincial elites similarly cut both ways. On the one hand, the creation of local and provincial administrative councils, mixed courts, and other new organizations provided unprecedented access to power and patronage resources. On the other hand, by abolishing some of the special privileges and exemptions that had benefited the elite, the reforms brought ruin to some.²⁸

We have few accounts of the impact of the *tanzimat* on non-elites. But what we know about the experience of ordinary people indicates that it was

similarly mixed. Military conscription, forced labor, and a more efficient fiscal administration encroached upon the traditional liberties of populations whose survival in the best of times was precarious, while the trickle down of new jobs in the bureaucracy was inadequate and the jobs mostly menial. Some peasants and villagers, threatened with ruin, sought refuge in flight or became bandits.²⁹ What the reforms meant in practice to a poor Lebanese peasant can be seen in the life of Assaf Khater, recounted in this section.

The transformation from subject to citizen experienced by Middle Easterners is another theme of the *tanzimat* era. For the non-Muslim populations it was a transition fraught with peril. Since the minorities benefited from the semiautonomous status accorded them as “peoples of the Book,” or *dhimma* under Islamic law, by which they were accorded religious toleration and protection in return for their cooperation, they had a considerable stake in the existing system. Under the *millet* system, by which the Ottomans regulated the affairs of their non-Muslim subjects, local religious communities enjoyed freedom of worship and control over their local affairs, subject to certain conditions. By abolishing these privileges, the *tanzimat* reforms thus posed a significant challenge to the non-Muslim elites.³⁰

The situation of non-Muslim elites was complicated by the fact that in the course of the period many of them acquired special privileges and exemptions as a result of their employment by European businesses or governments. These extraterritorial privileges, called *berat*, had originally been granted by the Ottoman government to official representatives of European states as part of capitulatory agreements. They carried exemption from local taxes, justice, military service, and civic obligations. Similar arrangements existed in independent states like Afghanistan, Iran, and Morocco.

In the nineteenth century such privileges were often extended to the local employees (and their families) of European officials and businessmen in the Ottoman Empire. Many elite Moroccan Jews held analogous extraterritorial privileges granted by the Moroccan government. Similar arrangements existed in Iran. From the point of view of the state, the system resulted in a significant loss to the state treasury and threatened the success of the reform program. Because it unfairly loaded the dice against Muslim merchants and businessmen, the capitulation system constituted a flash point of popular Muslim indignation as well.³¹

Another theme of Ottoman modernization was reform of the educational system. The development of an efficient and modern cadre of administrative agents, as well as a modern officer corps for the army, required modern schools, books, and ideas to succeed. Secular ideas began to spread throughout the society, aided by the development of the press and of a modern education system. In the process, the authority of the local clergy (Muslim, Christian, and Jewish alike) was undermined.³² We are relatively well

informed on how this process played itself out in the Ottoman Empire at the level of the elite, but know far less about how it worked for ordinary people.

The incorporation of the Middle East into the emerging world economy is a second major source of change in the period. The increasingly closer mesh between the economies of the area and the international economy caused the erosion of many of the basic structures of the old regime—guilds, Sufi orders and other religious groupings, quarter- and village-based communities. These, however, continued to exist and to provide a semblance of order and meaning in the lives of the people. At the same time, new opportunities stimulated the development of new activities. By the end of the period, increased rural security and better communication stimulated commercial agriculture throughout the region. In the cities, the old artisan guild structures, once a mainstay of the urban economy, were significantly affected.

Three contrasting studies focus on individuals whose lives were profoundly shaped by the structures of the guild system. Deli Mehmet, a member of the Cairo slave dealers' guild, exposed the guild to public ridicule by his flagrant abuse of the regulations of the organization. Shemsigul, the Circassian slave woman whom he raped and made pregnant, brought suit in the Sharia court. Her story, told by Ehud Toledano, throws an interesting light on a neglected corner of Egyptian history: the Ottoman elite household and the slave trade that helped to sustain it. The abolition of slavery in the Ottoman Empire at the end of the nineteenth century brought an end to the Ottoman elite household. Sherry Vatter's contribution, a collective biography of the journeyman weavers of Damascus, focuses on the response of journeymen weavers to the nineteenth-century changes that buffeted the Syrian textile handicraft industry. She argues that while the importation of cheap British cottons had an important effect on local textile producers in Damascus, the expansion of the market in the nineteenth century enabled some sectors to ride out the mid-century crisis.

Another image of the perdurance of guild structures is provided by Nels Johnson's portrait of Ahmad, a pearl diver in the now defunct Persian Gulf pearling industry. (Although Ahmad's life falls mostly in the present century, given the different rhythms of Kuwaiti history it is more usefully studied in part 1 than alongside the lives of those who are his literal contemporaries.) Ahmad's experience suggests that the guild system continued to structure people's existence in the Persian Gulf fisheries after it had lost most of its relevance in economically more dynamic areas. It also serves to remind us of how recent is the impact of the oil boom on the area. The fragile ecology of the Gulf has now been drastically affected by the development of the Gulf region and by the 1991 war.

Nineteenth-century Ottomans, even fairly farsighted ones, had little doubt that the empire would survive for some time, despite its manifest

weaknesses. European rule (which was to pose a fundamental cultural challenge to all Middle Easterners) lay on the horizon, not yet fully actualized. (Of course, exception must be made here for the Maghrib, most of which slipped under French rule in the nineteenth century.) Over time, European political domination gradually altered the context within which culture and society existed, and with it the way most people led their lives.

Similarly, despite our present-day sense that Middle Eastern nationalisms are basic to the area, until the defeat and breakup of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, nationalism was not a major force among the Muslim populations outside of the Balkans. Only after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I did nationalism become a major political force among Turks and Arabs. By 1880, the nationalist “traditions” that were later to reshape the cultural and political landscape of the region were still being “invented.”³³

Since North Africa was the first portion of the Middle East to be subjected to European conquest, it is there that we must look for the first stirrings of anticolonial resistance. In this prenatalist age, resistance inevitably drew upon deeply rooted cultural and political forms, especially that of *jihād*. Yet despite the received pieties of official nationalist discourse, according to which opposition was general, the realities of the European threat were differently assessed by different people at different times. Given the overwhelming superiority of European arms, the decision to take up weapons was neither simple nor automatic. The portrait of Mohand N’Hamoucha, a Moroccan Berber tribesman, underscores the complex process by which some individuals were led to become involved in resistance.

To understand how Mohand N’Hamoucha became a local leader of opposition to French imperialism, one must consider first the ambiguous situation of his tribe, the Aith Ndhir, between the government-dominated central plain and the Middle Atlas Mountains, home to large pastoralist tribal groups. While some of his kinsmen were drawn into urban networks at Fez and Meknes and were subsequently exposed to French intimidation and blandishments, Mohand and his friends took the road to resistance. How and why they did so is the subject of Edmund Burke’s contribution. Mohand’s story helps distance us from the pieties of the official history, according to which there was widespread popular support for anticolonial resistance. As perceptions of the European threat and possible options changed, individuals were led to reassess their situations constantly.

The final essay in this section is Julie Oehler’s account of the dramatic role played by Bibi Maryam, an elite woman of the Bakhtiyari tribal confederacy in southwestern Iran during World War I. In some ways, the situation of the Bakhtiyari resembles that of the Aith Ndhir, trapped between a would-be modernizing state and European power. But the dynamics of history in early-twentieth-century Iran diverged from those in Morocco in

important ways and shaped a different context for action. Most crucially, the hierarchical structures of the Bakhtiyari, and thus of elite women's scope for political action, were quite different from the much more diffuse and egalitarian organization of the Aith Ndhir. Oehler's contribution also illuminates the public role of women in the Middle East and is usefully placed alongside Julia Clancy-Smith's chapter in the following section.

The Colonial Experience

World War I and its aftermath constituted a watershed of unprecedented significance that led to far-reaching political changes throughout the area. According to the conventional narrative, the politics of the Middle East from 1918 until 1967 revolved around the struggle of nationalism and imperialism. For the most part, the history of this period has been viewed primarily from the perspective of the elite. Part 2 of this volume brings together biographies of individuals who lived through this era. As a group, they provide the basis for an alternative reading of the history of the period.

Changes in the world of politics are the most obvious. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the abolition of the caliphate (1924) and sultanate (1925), basic cultural assumptions about identity and the nature of the state were transformed. The old elites and social groups, already weakened by the nineteenth-century changes, declined rapidly, while new ones, tied to new economic and political forces, emerged. Simultaneously, personal identity became increasingly based upon linguistically defined nationality instead of upon membership in a religious community under the Ottoman sultan/padishah. The resultant rise of nationalisms constituted an unparalleled mental revolution for many.

While one world was vanishing, another was establishing itself. After 1918, European colonial empires, which had already embraced all of Arab Africa, were extended to Arab Asia as well. Even the weak Iranian and Afghan states were made to accept sharp limitations on their sovereignty. Only Turkey managed to elude this particular fate, and then only after Atatürk had defeated the Greeks, British, and French. European rule not only changed the nature of the emerging political struggle within each country, it affected to varying degrees the lives of all.

The men and women whose biographies are included in part 2 of this book are a varied group. One of the things they have in common is the fact that they were all profoundly marked by the experience of colonialism—that complex of racist attitudes, policies, and politics predicated upon notions of European superiority and virtue—which shaped the societies of the region for two generations. Thus, their experiences and expectations were significantly different from those of their parents and grandparents. As European dominance pervaded society, life was irrevocably transformed,

even for peasants and tribespeople. The degree to which particular groups were affected varied, of course.

In the conventional account, colonialism is portrayed as a victimless crime that brought far more benefits than disadvantages to the area. As a consequence, we know a great deal more about colonial policymakers and the policies they implemented than we do about the ways in which colonial rule was experienced by Middle Eastern men and women.³⁴

After the establishment of European rule, the folly of *jihad* and other traditional forms of armed resistance gradually became evident. European occupation drastically reduced the available options for individuals. The case of Algeria helped set the mold for what was to follow. While some elite families emigrated to other parts of the Ottoman Empire following the French takeover in 1830, most remained behind. Tacit cooperation with the French colonial authorities alternated with petty acts of resistance (such as feigning laziness, or minor acts of theft and sabotage).³⁵

The experience of colonialism as it emerges in the biographies included here ran the gamut from heroism to opportunism. Julia Clancy-Smith provides a portrait of an Algerian popular Islamic saintly lineage in the mid-nineteenth century. Her essay focuses on the stratagems employed by Zaynab, the eldest daughter of a popular Sufi leader, or marabout, who succeeded her father as head of the Sufi *zawiya*, and her struggles against the French authorities on the one hand and family rivals on the other.

For non-Muslims, the period was one of narrowing options. Some were able to survive and even thrive. Others found themselves gradually marginalized in the new circumstances of the post-Ottoman Middle East. Hagob Hagobian, whose portrait is written by David Yaghoubian, is one of the first sort. Hagobian was an Armenian Christian born in eastern Anatolia, whose life began with the tragic death of his parents in the massacres of Armenians during World War I. Raised in an orphanage in northwestern Iran, he became a long-distance truck driver on the route from Tehran to the Gulf. Later in his life he migrated to California.

The narrowing personal options of the post-1918 Middle East can also be seen in Sami Zubaida's account of the life of Dr. Naji, an Iraqi Jewish provincial physician. Like many other Iraqi middle-class Jews, he was a nationalist opponent of the corrupt monarchy that ruled Iraq for Britain in the inter-war period. During his career as an employee of the Iraqi Ministry of Health, he moved from one provincial post to another. His devotion to his profession eventually collided with decreasing possibilities for professional advancement and the sterner politics of the post-1948 period. As a result, he too took the path of exile.

No subject in the modern history of the Middle East has received greater attention from scholars than nationalism. The conventional account stresses the ways in which in response to heroic leaders the masses mobi-

lized to overthrow Western rule. The obvious contradiction between the reality of ethnic diversity and the nationalist assumption of ethnic unity in Middle Eastern states is simply elided in most accounts. While we know quite a bit about nationalism as an ideology and a political movement, we are much less well informed about how it became the language of politics.³⁶ The role of nationalism as an ideology in serving the interests of indigenous elites in maintaining their dominance is generally not examined. It is here that the study of ordinary people's lives can contribute a great deal.

As presented in the literature, the triumph of nationalism seems foreordained and in no way problematic. Yet the terrible simplifications of the nationalist ideologues ran against the grain of the old social forms, personal attachments, and ways of thinking. By asking us to re-imagine the specific context in which nationalisms emerged, the biographies provide us with the materials of a more complex and culturally sensitive understanding of this elusive phenomenon. The rise of nationalism, these biographies suggest, needs to be situated not only in the context of Arab nationalist ideology but also in that of local politics and the specific options available to individuals.

This theme clearly emerges in Abdullah Schleifer's biography of Izz al-Din al-Qassam. Schleifer shows that Palestinian popular resistance to British and Zionist domination of mandatory Palestine arose from multiple roots. These included Islamic reformism, Sufism, and late Ottoman pan-Islam, as well as urban-based secular nationalism. Philip Khoury's portrait of Abu Ali al-Kilawi shows us an old-style neighborhood enforcer, or *qabaday*, rooted in quarter-based youth gangs, whose ideology derived from Islamic notions of chivalry and the cult of masculine physical prowess. With the changes in Damascene society, the old patronage networks grew less important and new political forms gradually emerged. Eventually, Abu Ali and those like him were replaced by a new style of resolutely modern nationalist organizers. M'hamed Ali, a Tunisian labor leader and early nationalist, is a third figure whose biography is especially revealing of the way nationalism came to the area. In his case, involvement in labor organizing followed service in the Ottoman army during World War I and exile in Berlin in the last years of World War I. Through him, we get a sense of the complex relations between the chief nationalist party, the Néo-Destour, the chief Tunisian labor union, the Confédération Général du Travail Tunisien, and the various groups on the colonial left. It is a theme that can be found elsewhere in the region.

While the major story of the period is one of the transformation of the political world, the social and cultural worlds were no less affected. Artisan shops were gradually supplemented by factories and industrial enterprises. Smokestacks increasingly rivaled minarets along the new urban skyline, and new forms of communication such as the telegraph and telephone, rail-