
Boyar, Ebru, and Kate Fleets eds. *Middle Eastern and North African Societies in the Interwar Period*. Leiden: Brill, 2018. 338 pp. (ISBN-978-90-04-36949-8)

The Middle East region has been the focus of many academic studies throughout the past decades, especially during the years after the first and second world wars. Many Western scholars and writers decided to write about this region trying to understand the nature of its political, social, and cultural issues and explaining and analyzing the roots and causes of its many problems. *Middle Eastern and North African Societies in the Interwar Period* is part of *Economic and Political Studies of the Middle East and Asia*, a series of scholarly works published by Brill. In a book of 338 pages, editors Ebru Boyar and Kate Fleet have collected a number of very interesting topics written by some knowledgeable though lesser known authors covering a variety of subjects related to the Middle East in a very critical period of its history in the years between the two bloody world wars of the 20th century.

The first chapter of the book is written by the editor themselves. It is entitled “Approaching Societies in the Interwar Middle East and North Africa,” and it is a thorough examination of Middle Eastern societies from a social perspective rather than a political one. As rightly pointed out by the authors, their priority in writing this chapter has been non-state and to some extent non-classical political factors, but instead focusing on factors such as mass communication, music and the spread of ideas. It is also an attempt to explain how the Middle East entered the “new world” in terms of social connections, urban-rural relations and transnational contacts. One important issue regarding the Middle East during the two world wars was the emergence of the press in the form of newspapers and magazines. This new development which was an unprecedented event for Middle Eastern societies revolutionized the relations between state and people in many ways, especially by highlighting the role of intellectuals in these countries.

The second chapter of the book is quite a different perspective of the Middle East during the inter-war period in which the author, Ulrike Freitag, takes a look at the state-society relations through the lens of urban development, highlighting the major themes in post-Ottoman urban history. The understanding of cities is of great importance, the author argues, because in his opinion, cities were to some extent laboratories for governmental experiments and intervention. They also became important stages for societal reactions to political, economic and social change. Moreover, they help us to have a better understanding of the emergence of new political and social movements in the inter-war period in the Middle East without which we may not be able to understand the emergence of modernity, modernization and civil society in this part of the world. The author chose Jeddah as a case-study trying to show how transportation, communication, education, urban planning, etc., in rural areas in general and Jeddah in particular were affected by the social and political agenda adopted by the state on one hand, and how it changed and expanded the state on the other hand.

In the third chapter of the book entitled “Beirut’s Musical Scene: A Narrative of Modernization and Identity Struggles under the French Mandate,” Diana Abban attempts to illustrate the relations between art and state during the interwar period in Beirut, one of the important capitals in the Middle East. In her narrative of art and its role in the formation of the new Middle East, the author chooses to focus on music trying to show the changes in taste and the struggles around musical modernization that took place in the musical field in Beirut and the region. The chapter is a success in showing how the emergence of a new “middle class” and the introduction of new technologies and new forms of entertainment were interlinked and changed musical practices during the interwar period, and how art in general, and music and theatre in particular played an important role in moving towards modernization in the region.

Mobility, roads, infrastructure, vehicles, trips, and tourism are the key words of the fourth chapter entitled “Tourism and Mobility in Italian Colonial Libya,” written by Brian L. McLaren. In this chapter, the author tries to show how new transportation technology affected Middle Eastern societies in general and Libya in particular. Perhaps the most important message of this chapter can be read in this sentence where the author argues that “the tourist exploitation of Libya during the governorship of Balbo was an extension of the modern social and political agenda of the colonial regime. Indeed, the development of a well-organized and efficient tourist system was premised on the modernization program that saw the construction of an infrastructure of roads and public services.”

The fifth chapter written by Emilio “the Call of Communication: Mass Media and Reform in Interwar Morocco” is all about modern media, communication, and print publication and their role in social transformation in Middle Eastern societies with an emphasis in Morocco as a case study. The chapter is an attempt to examine the interaction between media, state, religion, and society. To show how important was the role of media and communication in MENA societies during the interwar period, the author compares the role of the media of that time with the role of the so-called “Twitter revolutions” or “Facebook revolutions” in the 2011 Arab uprisings.

The sixth chapter entitled “Doctors Crossing Borders: The Formation of a Regional Profession in the Interwar Middle East” by Liat Kozma looks at the formation of a transnational professional identity across the Middle East during the interwar period with an emphasis on the role of networks and interconnections between medical doctors. The chapter is an attempt to show how a new generation of transnational profession, in this case doctors, emerged in the interwar period in Middle Eastern societies and how its emergence affected social transformation across these countries, arguing that pan Arabism, Arab nationalism, and educational development are good examples of this phenomenon.

“There She is, Miss Universe: Keriman Halis Goes to Egypt, 1933” is the topic of the seventh chapter written by Amit Bein, in which the author uses the story of a young Turkish beauty contest winner to show how the gender debate in the interwar Middle East began and how it contributed to the broader social transformation of the region. The chapter successfully demonstrates how during the interwar period some Middle Eastern societies were introduced to new concepts and issues such as feminism, male-female relations, the celebrity phenomenon, beauty contests, popular journalism, and commercial advertisements.

Ebru Boyar, the author of the eighth chapter, selected “Taking Health to the Village: Early Turkish Republican Health Propaganda in the Countryside” as the topic for her contribution to the book. The chapter covers a variety of issues from the establishment of a formal central healthcare structure (Ministry of Health) in Turkey during the interwar period, to how treating or pretending to treat old diseases by the ministry helped the government to improve health conditions across the country and at the same time to use healthcare as a tool for propaganda, especially in rural areas.

“The Provision of Water to Istanbul from Terkos: Continuities and Change from Empire to Republic” by Kate Fleet is the title of the ninth chapter of the book in which the author makes an attempt to show the transition process from empire to republic, shedding light on how the new Turkish government sought strategies of legitimacy (in this case water supply) in its drive to incorporate its citizens into the new state with which they were to identify. In other words, the article’s main contribution to the book is to show how welfare policies of modern governments brought them the legitimacy they needed by demonstrating the sharp contrast between them and the past regimes.

In her contribution to the collection, “Reforms or Restrictions? The Ottoman Muslim Family Law Code and Women’s Marital Status in Mandate Palestine,” Elizabeth Brownson pays attention to the very interesting and delicate issue of the legal transformation of family from a traditional status to a Western style one. The chapter is a clear demonstration of how sensitive issues such as family law in general, and marriage and women’s rights in particular, were affected by the whole process of social transformation in the post-Ottoman Empire era and what the main causes and challenges were there.

“Mapping Social Change through Matters of the Heart: Debates on Courtship, Marriage and Divorce in the Early Turkish Republican Era (1923–1950)” by Nazan Çiçek is the title of the last chapter of the book. It is somehow a complementary piece to the previous chapter which again touches upon the delicate issues of family such as marriage and divorce. As mentioned by the author, the main goal of the chapter is to show how marriage, both as an idea and an institution, was imagined, “problematized,” discussed and criticized in the early republican era in Turkey. To do this task, the author tries to illustrate the broader image and to show marriage in the greater context of social transformation. The clash between religious and secular discourses, the confrontation between traditional values and newly discovered Western ones, and observing this debate in intellectual and media circles are among the issues that the article manages to cover successfully.

To sum up the review, we can say that the book is an admirable piece of work in terms of its ability to demonstrate the transformation and change that the Middle East region went through during the interwar period. The different chapters of book, despite their different perspectives and narratives, have successfully achieved one shared goal and that is to show this transformation which revolutionized and shaped the Middle East in the 20th and 21st centuries.

The main weakness of the book is perhaps equating the Middle East with the Ottoman Empire. The other problem with the book seems to be simply generalizing the findings of its chapters' case studies to the whole region of the Middle East and North Africa in spite of meaningful differences between the countries in the region. However, one big accomplishment of the book is the fact that its chapters and case studies successfully show how reform policies and transformations in different layers of state and society went hand in hand in the interwar period across the Middle East and North Africa. Due to its rich historical and interdisciplinary nature, I strongly recommend this book to students and researchers of Middle East studies who would like to deepen their understanding of not only the political but also the social and cultural dimensions of Middle East affairs.

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