

Editors' Introduction

This special issue of *Radical History Review* is devoted to “national myths in the Middle East.” The essays appearing in this issue examine some of the ways in which certain myths and cultural “traditions” have been constructed and deployed by various groups in different parts of the region in defining the “nation” along particular lines (e.g., religious, secular, cultural, linguistic, ethnic/racial, gendered, etc.), as well as in building nation-states, and/or challenging existing definitions of the nation or existing nation-state foundations. As numerous studies have demonstrated, all nations and nationalisms invoke legitimizing myths and metahistorical grand narratives. Such myths and their narrative emplotments frequently exclude certain groups within the physical or conceptual national boundaries or accord them a lesser status and fewer rights. Moreover, these myths are generally contested from within or outside the designated national parameters, and often clash with a host of other matrices circumscribing particular conceptions of the self, the common group, and others.

These myths may stress a real and/or imagined shared cultural heritage, religion, and language of the nation, or the supposed longevity and continuity of the nation (even despite periodic interruptions or the very recent emergence of the nation), as well as some form of “manifest destiny.” Regardless of their function, national myths offer critical insights into the very processes of nation building and national belonging, as well as the particular contours of a given nation, exposing what is at stake in those processes and delineations. Of course, it is patently clear that to say nations and nationalisms are mythic, ideological, and narrative constructs in no way suggests that they do not have concrete consequences, as a number of essays in this issue demonstrate.

Mapping the development of nation-states in the Middle East has been one of the central preoccupations of many historians in the field who in various ways

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have addressed the themes of nationalism and national identity. Typically, these accounts chronicle the evolution of nationalist movements, particularly in the struggles against European/Western imperialism, most often by documenting the lives and thoughts of leading nationalist intellectuals or party ideologues. The essays in this issue transcend the more traditional accounts by offering new readings of political movements and leaders and by emphasizing the historical agency of those previously underrepresented in the master narratives of the nation, underlining the heterogeneity of historical forces and actors shaping the multifaceted and multilayered history of various nations in the Middle East.

The term *Middle East* appears to have been coined in 1900 by the British general Sir Thomas Edward Gordon.¹ It gained currency after its use in 1902 by the American naval geographer and historian Alfred Thayer Mahan, and was subsequently popularized by the *Times* of London. The term was clearly conceived in the framework of European/Western geopolitical and strategic considerations, delineating the region as a realm of actual or potential political, military, and economic rivalry and spheres of influence among European/Western imperial powers. Since then, this geographic designation has assumed more fluid boundaries and has come to represent different sets of interests and considerations for the outside major powers. Nowadays, the “Middle East” encompasses a larger region and many more countries, particularly after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire in World War I and the redrawing of the map of the former Arab territories by Britain and France, which established their “mandate” rule over these territories.

We should keep in mind that most of the countries in the region gained their national independence only after World War I or World War II: Egypt (from Britain, 1922), Iraq (from Britain, 1930), Lebanon (from France, 1946), Syria (from France, 1946), Jordan (from Britain, 1946), Libya (from Italy, 1951), Tunisia (from France, 1956), Sudan (from Britain, 1956), Morocco (from France and Spain, 1956 and 1958), Mauritania (from France, 1960), Kuwait (from Britain, 1961), Algeria (from France, 1962), South Yemen (from Britain, 1967), Oman (from Britain, 1970), Bahrain (from Britain, 1971), Qatar (from Britain, 1971), and the United Arab Emirates (from Britain, 1971). Turkey was all that remained of the Ottoman Empire by 1923. The present-day Saudi state, adopting the official designation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, emerged after the incorporation, in 1927, of territories in western Arabia relinquished by Britain. Iran barely escaped outright colonization by Britain and Russia. And in 1948, Israel and the short-lived independent Palestine were created through the division of the former British mandate in Palestine.

From the above list, it should be clear that in this issue of *Radical History Review* we have opted for the broad, though not methodologically unproblematic, geographic demarcation of the Middle East, comprising West Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and North Africa. People in the region use the designation *Middle East* alongside other local, national, regional, transnational and transregional modes of self-referentiality based on particular identity constructs, locations, and aspirations—for example, Asians, (North) Africans, Arabs, Kurds, Israelis (or Israeli Jews), Palestinians, Turks, Iranians, Persians, Baluchis, Azeris, Turkomans, Berbers, Sahrawis, Maghribis, even Europeans (as in the case of the governments of Israel and Turkey, or certain groups in Lebanon), Muslims, Christians, Jews (all with various subdenominations), Druze, Yezidis, Baha'is, and so on, as well as Zoroastrians, Copts, Armenians, and Assyrians/Chaldeans (the latter being religious communities with their own distinctive ethnic and/or linguistic identities). In effect, the constituent parts of the Middle East and different population groups are simultaneously subsumed under a gamut of local, ethnic, cultural, religious, national, regional, and transnational categories, which have impacted the formation and reception of various national myths. As the various contributions to this issue demonstrate, when probing national histories, one is often inevitably faced with the need to engage also in micro- or macrohistories: subnational and supranational.

In recent years, studies of nationalism have expanded their focus to include nonelite actors and to examine the social bases of nationalism, in addition to the numerous regional, generational, institutional, legal, and socioeconomic factors that have impacted the presentations and interpretations of nationalism. The essays appearing in this issue incorporate these trends in different measures. Janet Afary's essay, "Shi'i Narratives of Karbalâ and Christian Rites of Penance: Michel Foucault and the Culture of the Iranian Revolution, 1978–1979," exposes the very *modern*

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features of the Islamist ideology that mobilized a large segment of the revolutionary masses in the name of ostensibly *traditional* Shi'i Muslim values of justice and martyrdom in opposition to the Pahlavi regime. Furthermore, Afary analyzes the fascination of the French philosopher Michel Foucault with discursive and ritual practices of Shi'i Islam and notes Foucault's failure to grasp the existence of multiple interpretations of Shi'ism at the time of the Iranian Revolution. She also points to the transnational appeal of certain myths and practices, such as the rituals of penance. James McDougall's essay, "Myth and Counter-Myth: 'The Berber' As National Signifier in Algerian Historiographies," examines the ways in which the "Berber question" has prefigured in contested historiographies of Algeria and Algerian identity. McDougall demonstrates that since the colonial period, the Berber has been viewed through the binary prism of Arab/Berber and that Algerian nationalist historiographies have approached the Berber question "as an idiom of contest and not as an end in itself," through either exclusionary or inclusive constructs of "Arab" and "Algerian" in reference to the "Berber."

Other articles in this volume address the political and cultural history of the Middle East as contested, ongoing tensions and debates about the role of "modernity" and religion in society. Geoff Porter, in "Unwitting Actors: The Preservation of Fez's Cultural Heritage," explores the selective use of Fez's history as an urban space in legitimizing current heritage projects that celebrate a romantic vision of Fez's place in Muslim history. Michelle Hartman and Alessandro Olsaretti, in "'The First Boat and the First Oar': Inventions of Lebanon in the Writings of Michel Chiha," dissect the discourse of one of Lebanon's early and prominent political writers to expose the very process of state building as one of myth-making and exclusion. Chiha's liberal language appeared to include all of Lebanon's diverse population, but in practice this rhetoric of "inclusivity" was put forth to protect the commercial Christian minority.

In our "Reflections" section, sociologist Rabab Abdulhadi explores her position as a Palestinian woman living in New York City and traveling to Palestine in the wake of September 11, 2001. Abdulhadi's piece, along with reflections by Israeli historian Ilan Pappé and anthropologist Nadia Abu el-Haj, are powerful reminders that the history of the contemporary Middle East is continually shaped by conflicts and that these conflicts influence the presentation and interpretation of history, though this is not to say that conflicts constitute the aggregate experience of the people and societies in the region. Conversely, their writings underscore the critical history of the region that predates these conflicts. In the "Teaching Radical History" section, Magnus T. Bernhardsson and Sally Charnow and Leila Hudson focus on the challenges of teaching Middle Eastern materials at American universities in the current political climate.

As elsewhere, certain groups in the Middle East have been excluded from full participation in social, economic, political, and/or religious spheres. In particular, the role of women in the region has been the focus of many new important works. Negar Mottahedeh reviews multimedia works by two Iranian-born women artists, Shirin Neshat and Gita Hashemi, who in very different ways have explored the centrality of gender in Muslim societies in general (in the works of the former) and during the Iranian Revolution of 1978–79 and after the Islamist seizure of power (in the work of the latter). Sarah Gualtieri reviews Elizabeth Thompson's study of how French colonial rule in Lebanon and Syria created "a paternalistic civic order" and Joseph Massad's study of Jordan's emergence as a "nation" out of a colonial context with no prior existence as "Jordan." We conclude this issue with R. J. Lambrose's regular feature: "The Abusable Past."

The essays in this issue should dispel the largely uninformed and frequently inimical, essentialist representations of most societies and cultures subsumed under the rubric of the *Middle East* appearing in much of the mainstream U.S. media and political discourse. We see the very act of informed interpretation and analyses of particular aspects of these national histories as a courageous political intervention, and we underscore our responsibility as activists and educators to make critical public inquiry, especially during periods of "fear."

—Adina Back, Magnus T. Bernhardsson, Mansour Bonakdarian,
and Sally Charnow

Notes

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1. Rose Greaves, "Gordon, General Sir Thomas Edward," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 11, fascicle 2 (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 2002), 139.

