

## The Review Section: Hegemony and Identity Politics in the Levant

Wael Abu-ʿUksa and Yonatan Mendel

In this issue we present four reviews that capture key concepts relating to the creation of social and political hegemony in the Middle East as they pertain to identity construction, processes of modernization, and the development of legal systems in the region. Laura Robson's review essay, "Minorities and Majorities: The Nation-State and Identitarian Politics in the Modern Levant," presents the historical dynamics of identity politics as they took shape at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of the interaction between three institutional forces: the Ottoman Empire, the modern nation-state, and the colonial powers. Presenting a comparative review of Kais Firro's *Metamorphosis of the Nation (al-Umma): The Rise of Arabism and Minorities in Syria and Lebanon, 1850–1940* and Benjamin White's *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria*, Robson shows the deep impact that the alterations in the social and political hegemony in the Levant have had on the construction of identity in this region. Her essay rethinks the modern roots of sectarianism and sectarian identity, and suggests reconsidering the relationship between the terms "minority" and "majority" and the Ottoman millet system.

In his review of Ebubekir Ceylan's *The Ottoman Origins of Modern Iraq: Political Reform, Modernization and Development in the Nineteenth-Century Middle East*, Michael Eppel examines the political origins of one nation, modern Iraq, and goes on to highlight a neglected historical perspective on the region's political order. Ceylan's book suggests a reassessment of the role of internal and external components of political hegemony in the establishment of modern Iraq. In his review Eppel demonstrates that the construction of modern Iraq was the result not only of the impact of British and Western forces but also of local social and modernization

processes that took place prior to the mandate period. His scrutiny of Ottoman state policies from the perspective of Baghdad rather than that of Istanbul reveals hidden layers—including that of the “structure” of local modernity.

Omri Paz’s review of Fariba Zarinebaf’s *Crime and Punishment in Istanbul, 1700–1800* follows a similar logic and seeks to rethink the epochal turn to modernity in light of developments that took place in the heart of Ottoman political power. As stressed by Paz, Zarinebaf’s work traces the development of new forms of criminal justice and law enforcement in the eighteenth century and illustrates how changes in criminal law and the legal system had already taken place during that century, which challenges the common periodization of “modernity.” This study, as Paz indicates, stimulates historians to reconsider the key dates regarding the beginning of modernity in the region.

The last review concludes this issue by stressing the intertwined relationship between identity construction and socio-political assimilation. Marinos Pourgouris reviews *Mongrels or Marvels: The Levantine Writings of Jacqueline Kahanoff*, edited by Deborah A. Starr and Sasson Somekh, highlighting the complexity of identity by focusing on the writing of Jacqueline Kahanoff, the renowned Egyptian-Jewish novelist and essayist. As indicated by Pourgouris, the “in-betweenness” of Kahanoff—as Egyptian, Jewish, Eastern, and Western—and her quest for regional integration can be seen in her development of the concept of “Levantinism” as a theoretical and cosmopolitan framework that challenges the hegemonic categories of political identity. Pourgouris highlights the way in which Kahanoff’s work illustrates how the place of “Levantinism” as a political and cultural category in her personal intellectual biography changed; he also analyzes some of her diverse positions toward Western culture.

The interconnection between the different reviews reinvigorates the academic discussion about the relationship between ideas and socio-political hegemony. Therefore, it is our hope that reading these reviews will stimulate researchers and policymakers to reevaluate key concepts of memory and identity in a Middle East that is shaped by struggles related to political hegemony and social domination.