

## **Beyond Connectivity: The Middle East in Global History**

Guest Editors' Note  
On Barak and Haggai Ram

### State of the Field

The collected articles in this volume join what is rapidly emerging as a dynamic and increasingly crowded field in Middle East studies. In this field methodological nationalisms—whose practitioners consider the state to be an exclusive unit of analysis—are out, and global perspectives on Middle Eastern history are in, with monographs, articles, and two prior conference proceedings published as anthologies. This rather novel field even now seems to have a history of its own, which we tease out in what follows by comparing this volume's themes and insights with its two forerunners, *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print* (2014) and *A Global Middle East: Mobility, Materiality and Culture in the Modern Age, 1880-1940* (2015), both of which emerged from international workshops. Such a maneuver affords a glimpse into the thematic and conceptual changes that occurred in the intervening years. This volume too resulted from an international workshop. Titled "Thinking Globalization in the Middle East," the workshop was convened by Kfir Cohen Lustig of the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and Eugene Rogan, Director of the Middle East Centre at St. Antony's College, and was held in 2019 at St. Antony's College. We would like to thank the director and fellows for their generous hospitality. This particular event is significant, as it connects the leap in the globalization of scholarship since the 1990s to the resulting emergence of global history as a prevalent scholarly perspective, increasingly on the Middle East as well. In addition, like the two trailblazers mentioned above, this volume is similarly interested in networks, connectivity, and the circulation of commodities, people, and ideas. There is, in other words, a degree of continuity—a strong indication of a solidifying field—and

most of the articles brought together here could also adorn the tables of contents of those two previous collections.

#### Beyond Connectivity

Recent critiques, however, problematize the exclusive focus of global history on global flows of mobile figures, commodities, and ideas, often at the expense of those who are left behind, as recent scholarly interventions by Jeremy Adelman, Sebastian Conrad, and Samuel Moyn point out. Heeding these critiques, this issue's articles draw attention to the limitations of the flow of ideas, and to the importance of material infrastructures that by their very nature are fixed.

Moreover, and again in contrast to this issue's above-mentioned predecessors, the articles presented here are not global histories written from nowhere, detached from specific places, or written from a bird's-eye view. Alongside the Oxford conference from which many of the articles emerged, this issue is also the result of the 2018–2019 activity of the “Global Middle East Research Group” at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute. We would like to acknowledge Kfir Cohen Lustig for initiating the research group and pioneering the introduction of global studies in Israel. The fact that global thinking has no institutional place in Israeli universities (a symptom of a global condition in higher education in many other places as well) is something the Van Leer setting both demonstrated and sought to ameliorate in various ways. Consequently, members deliberated the stakes and implications of writing about the global Middle East *from Israel*. Moreover, during its two years of monthly meetings, this group developed a curriculum, mapped new contributions to the field, hosted prominent global historians, and sought ways and means to move forward. In particular its members engaged with salient issues that also cropped up in several of the essays that follow: an attempt to wed two kinds of materialism, the old Marxian and the newer Latourian brands, in order to write the global history of the region. Instead of a historiography that prioritized global intellectual history, here was an attempt to go one level below a still necessary social turn in global history, toward including infrastructural and environmental perspectives in the Middle East, including Palestine/Israel.

#### What Is “the Global Middle East”?

The aforementioned tensions—resulting from the desire to write a *locally-grounded* global history, one that engages with connectivity and movement between spaces yet does not do away with important features of the global—animate the articles included here. Hence, in our initial correspondence with the chosen authors, we

asked them to consider the following points in their contributions (quoted below verbatim):

- (1) The tension and co-animation of the local, regional and global. By this, however, we do not denote some pre-given concentric spatialization. Rather, we mean the entanglement of these three as well as their discursive/imaginary/political separation into distinct spheres.
- (2) While we all seek to recover the voices and agencies of local actors, we are also committed to demonstrating the structuring patterns and non-local constraints that affect these agents.
- (3) The existing literature on global and trans-national histories usually focuses on movement and circulation. While flows of commodities, ideas, etc. are obviously important, we would also like you to pay attention to what is left behind and remains static and why this is the case. At the same time, please reflect on the relationship between the dynamic and the static components of an integrated system.
- (4) Middle East history is a latecomer to global history. As such, it might appear to be a useful laboratory for exploring the validity and applicability of insights that pertain to other places. At the same time, we believe that Middle East history provides us with insights to rethink global history itself. Hence, we would like you to engage, as Middle East historians, with pertinent scholarly literature on global history in ways that challenge/reconfigure its underlying assumptions.

In other words, the unique historical and geopolitical situation in the region relegates it to the role of a key junction and simultaneously to a peripheral status with respect to power dynamics and the ability of its inhabitants and elites to inform their own lives. This makes global histories written about this region especially pertinent for considering together flux and fixity, cosmopolitan circulation and the lack of agency and maneuverability—the key tensions that characterize the literature at the present moment. The structure of this issue was inspired by all the features of the emerging historiography, our visions for the field's future, and the particularities of writing a global history of the Middle East, as well as the fruitful idiosyncrasies of combining an international workshop hosting prominent scholars with a research group that included senior scholars side by side with doctoral students.

This volume includes three parts: it opens with full-length articles by leading scholars in the field, all paying heed to the above features. Thereafter follows a section bringing together shorter contributions by three doctoral students and the two editors. While affording a peek into the field's future, all of this section's texts are devoted to global histories of late Ottoman Palestine, Mandatory Palestine,

and the State of Israel. They thus all implicitly address the question of writing the global history of, and from, Israel/Palestine. Following these two parts are works of art by Hili Greenfeld—an artist who was also a member of the Van Leer research group—that together with a text she authored constitute the volume's third section. In this latter section, boundary crossings inherent to global history provide an opportunity to bridge art and scholarship.

The first section opens with **Faisal Devji's** article on what has been traditionally seen as global Islamic terrorism, manifested most spectacularly by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). It argues that the analytical knee-jerk reaction of resorting automatically to the depth of ideology fails to account for the organization's superficiality as seen, for instance, in the recruitment of people who were completely ignorant of anything Islamic. The article therefore opens up avenues of global intellectual history in a post-ideological global condition. This attention to the impoverishment of ideologies connects with **Cyrus Schayegh's** contribution, which speaks to the insufficiency and fluidity of our existing spatial categories, particularly regionalism and regionality in the Middle East. This insight, we suggest, should be applied elsewhere and more broadly as well.

Schayegh's article reconfigures the connections between regionality and supraregional (and perhaps global) processes. This reconfiguration is echoed in **Relli Shechter's** article, which examines the extent to which processes of neoliberal standardization formed in global settings support and are inflected by local, national articulations and implementations in Egypt. Against this background, and despite the aforementioned critiques of the insufficiency of global flows, **Guillemette Crouzet's** and **Menashe Anzi's** essays on the circulation of commodities (firearms) and ideas (Jewish, Islamic, and Christian), respectively, demonstrate the indispensability of this kind of global history. At the same time, the latter two contributions develop the "oceanic turn" in global history and direct us to the Indian Ocean world.

The second part of this issue brings together short global histories of Greater Syria, Palestine, and the State of Israel. **Shira Pinhas's** essay, which opens this section, anchors the global studies of partitions in the concrete material conditions of road paving in Mandatory Palestine. Subverting the conventional hierarchization of ideas over materiality, Pinhas recasts the familiar terrain of partition as a global process. **Omri Eilat's** essay situates urban renewal in late Ottoman Damascus in the context of two conflicting "globalizations," Anglo-French capitalism on the one hand and Ottoman-German state-led development on the other. In doing so, the essay pluralizes globalization processes and reveals those aborted projects that were left behind. In her essay, **Basma Fahoum** takes us to the Arab-Israeli conflict and its

global reverberations. Here the focus is on how boycott and anti-boycott strategies of tobacco products were shaped in a transnational arena involving multinational tobacco companies and Jewish Diasporas in Europe and the United States. The essay's conclusions anticipate recent boycott campaigns such as the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, or BDS. Similarly, **On Barak's** essay traces the historical legacies of a current predicament: by focusing interchangeably on the global and the local (i.e., interwar Jaffa), it generates insights from global history to reconceptualize global warming. Finally, **Haggai Ram's** essay takes a transnational approach to the study of the evolution of drug culture in Mandatory Palestine, demonstrating how this process was linked to broader processes and circumstances elsewhere in the Levant. As in Pinhas's opening essay, here too the materiality of roads informs cerebral cognitive processes.

Movement and connections in the region, such as those demonstrated by Pinhas and Ram, set the stage for the last section of this issue, which is dedicated to art in a transnational context. Artist **Hili Greenfeld** showcases an exhibition she created that directs attention to the boundary work performed by supposedly neutral modes of display. Choosing to conclude this issue with a reflection on art points to the similar preoccupations of global historians and practitioners in other disciplines.

For the last decade, global history has been preoccupied with supplanting the methodological nationalism that still characterizes scholarship of the Middle East and that sees the nation-state as a central organizing principle for politics, economics, and social relations. However, transnational capital flows, the new media, global warming, and the cross-border movement of people, goods, ideas—as well as viruses in the present—are pushing historians to trace similar flows and connections in the past. This issue of *JLS* follows on the heels of these recent interventions, and at the same time proposes new ways of investigating the position of the Middle East in general, and Palestine/Israel in particular, within the expanding and exciting field of global history.

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