

A Post-Workshop Report by Mostafa Minawi

A New Start?

Libyan History and Historiography at a Time of Historical Transition

June 8-9, 2012

Zentrum Moderner Orient, Kirchweg 33, 14129 Berlin, Germany

Convened by

Mostafa Minawi (EUME-Fellow 2011/12)

The idea for this workshop was inspired by the recent events in Libya. The revolution which started in February 2011, and resulted in the toppling of the Gaddafi regime, opened up the possibilities for the inscription of a new future for the people of Libya. For historians, the change of regimes also signaled the possibility of writing a new kind of past for Libya. I, as well as, many of my colleagues working within the framework of Libyan history, felt that now, at this historical juncture after the fall of a strongly entrenched regime, is the perfect time to come together to discuss new possibilities in terms of access to research material, Libyan and non-Libyan research project collaborations, and the opening up of a new phase of revisionary historiographical tradition.

The workshop on the writing of Libyan history, past, present and future was convened by Mostafa Minawi (EUME Fellow 2011/12). It was organized within the framework of the research program Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe (EUME) in cooperation with the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), and took place from June 8-9, 2012 at the ZMO in Berlin. The workshop represented a rare meeting of scholars, from North, East, South and West. The papers presented, and the discussions that followed reflected the richness of the various research strands with a focus on 19th- and 20th-century Libyan history. The panels, had six thematic foci allowing for the presentation of the scholars' varied approaches, followed by often heated discussions about the main questions that were posed to frame the discussions of the workshop, namely: What do we really know about 19th- and early 20th-century Libya? What are the historical connections between Benghazi (east), Tripoli (west) and Fezzan (south)? How are the Libyan coastal cities tied to Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa? What socio-political events of the late 19th century have helped to shape contemporary Libyan social and political

structure? How has historical research and knowledge production been organized and deployed in the past, and how do we envision the regime change to impact the state of Libyan history and historiography in the near future?

The first panel focused on the writing of history of the colonial period, questioning the narratives of the Italo-Ottoman war and Libyan resistance through the exclusive reliance on colonial archives, or the telling of a nationalist history of resistance and heroism. For example, Eileen Ryan (Columbia University) focused on the case of the Sanusi and tribal notables' relations with the Italian colonial government. She criticized the Libyan nationalist narrative which painted a dichotomous image of one group of actors vs. another, as an oversimplified classification of resistor vs. collaborators. She argued that a much more nuanced understanding of this period would have to emerge that would transcend the myths of nation-building through resistance, ultimately tying the Sanusi order to the particularities of late-19th-century context, before and during the colonial period.

Jakob Kraus (FU Berlin) in his turn presented a comprehensive outline of Italian historiography, which painted the Italian occupation of Libya as a function an Italo-centric narrative of domestic politics in Rome. He, like Ryan, highlighted how the often-used historical periodization of pre- and post-Italian occupation has had a distortive impact, especially when taking into consideration the local Libyan political and social continuities, as well as transformation, which started well before the 1911 war and continued into well after the end of the Italian occupation.

The second panel with Mahmoud Edeek and Suad al-Jaffal, both of the University of Tripoli, gave a summary of 19th-century diplomatic and economic relations of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica with Europe. Both of their papers triggered an important historiographical debate about the validity of looking at these two regions' international relations outside of the context of the Ottoman Empire. A heated discussion took place in which the history of Libya in the 19th century was argued to be one of provincial history of the Ottoman Empire, versus a history of a peripheral locality acting with independent agency while dealing with international actors across the Mediterranean. Questions of research and analytical frameworks for 19th-century Libyan history came up repeatedly throughout the rest of this two-day workshop.

The third panel focused on tackling some standing questions about the history of the Sanusi order in the 19th century, a cornerstone of Libyan history in the 19th and 20th century. Knut Vikør (University of Bergen), an expert on Sufi orders in Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa, gave a stimulating talk about the non-politicized early nature of the order, and how its origins should influence our understanding of the order's relations with various imperial powers, both Ottoman and non-Ottoman. Mostafa Minawi (EUME Fellow 2011/12) continued this discussion, highlighting the problematic of writing the history of the relationship of the Sanusi order with the Ottoman imperial center as a function of an a-priori Libyan nationalist sentiment, particularly in light of the abundance of contrary evidence available in relatively recently opened Ottoman records. The theme of the necessity of archival research as the guide to writing the history of the Ottoman Libya, beyond the Ghaddafi-era state-sponsored nationalist narrative, was carried into the discussions of the second day of the workshop.

In the fourth panel (the first of day two), Henning Sievert (Bonn University) presented a summary of his research relying on Ottoman archival sources to map out the various levels of governmental authorities in the Libyan provinces and the Ottoman center, and their relationship to one another. His detailed research and careful analysis turned the discussion towards the need for a close examination, and reexamination of the sources found in Istanbul,

as well as Tripoli. In the same panel, Güneş Işıksel (Collège de France) highlighted yet another newly accessible genre of sources for the writing of Ottoman-African history; namely the late 19th-century travelogues and biographies that have recently come to light. Both of these papers re-opened the debates about the importance of new sources for historians, which ultimately had to be coupled with the willingness to question older and often well-accepted narratives in favor of presenting newly discovered evidence on the local and imperial levels. This allowed the participants to debate the conceptualization of the Ottoman rule as colonial vs. imperial, and the problem of classifying a so-called “local” subject vs. “foreign” subject during the long “Age of Imperialism.”

In the fifth panel, the senior Libyan historian, Salaheddin Sury (CNARHS, Tripoli), presented a rich paper in which he gave from his personal experience as a Libyan academic whose work spans over five decades, the political changes and their impact on the state of scholarship in Libya. His paper was followed by that of an Ottoman archival expert, Ebübekir Subaşı (BOA, Istanbul), who spent several months studying the state of the Libyan national archives back in 2008. The workshop participants were very eager to learn about the state of research in Libya and how scholarship on Libyan history stood to gain from the changes of the regime. Despite some sad news about the loss of archival records during the revolution, the discussion ended on an optimistic note, in which Dr. Sury informed us of a new law going into effect next year. This law will allow for a better catalogued archival records, and ultimately freer access to the riches of the Libyan state archives to interested participants. Dr. Sury and Mr. Subaşı’s practical experience in both the Libyan and Ottoman archives over the past few decades, and their on-the-ground engagement with new developments added an invaluable and tangible quality to this workshop.

The concluding panel turned the attention of the participants to the often-neglected Libyan south. First, architect Emna Alaoui (ENAU, Tunis) presented a summary of her field research on the architecture of the old city of Ghoudames. She highlighted the importance of non-textual sources for the writing of social history, particularly for societies that have left us very little in terms of written documents. She implicitly argued for a collaborative effort between art historians, archeologists, and historians to uncover the micro-history of societies living outside of the text-based urban-centers. Nora Lafi (ZMO) kept the focus on the Libyan south as a case study for her talk, but broadened the framework to allow for a shift in the discussion towards the future of Libyan historiography. She encouraged us to continue the trend of “decolonizing” not just the writing of history, but also our methodological and theoretical approaches to historiography, taking her cue from South Asian historians of the last two decades. Her passionate and insightful paper allowed the concluding discussion to return to the broader questions of the workshop and to examine where Libyan – and by extension Ottoman provincial – history stands at this historical moment in time.

Some of the participants argued that we should be well beyond post-colonial nationalist narratives. In other words, the argument was made that it was time for the field to step beyond the important turn of post-colonial discourses, towards the application of its theoretical riches by returning back into the sources. Others questioned whether that was at all possible, particularly at this revolutionary juncture, to consciously transcend the writing of history from a post-colonial nationalist context. In other words, can or should the history of post-colonial nation states ever be divorced from the political reality of its post-colonial origins.

The second heated discussion took place over the writing of Ottoman history in the Libyan provinces. Can or should one approach Ottoman history as an imperial, local, or even colonial one? What are the implications of each approach and does a historian have to choose when

remaining close to the sources? These questions helped to highlight the need for further dialogue between scholars who use a variety of sources, for the common purpose of providing a better understanding of Libyan past and of course, present.

The discussion also produced certain clear agreements. Most notably, all participants agreed that there is a timely need to question much of the existing historical narratives and to reframe the writing of Libyan history based on new archival sources. The workshop participants also agreed that this critical moment in time could easily be hijacked by yet another telling of nationalist historiography, replacing one revolutionary narrative (that of Ghaddafi) with a contemporary one. This only helps to highlight the importance of supporting efforts in Libya and abroad to position research-based scholarship at the heart of reform efforts. Turning the spotlight onto the centrality of free access to archives and research-based trans-national writing of history at this point in time can make a large difference in the long-term future of Libyan-based and Libyan-focused scholarship.

Despite many thought-provoking presentations, the real strength of the workshop was the facilitation of uninhibited discussion on Libyan history from within Libya and without. The interaction between those working on Ottoman, colonial and local histories of North Africa, each within their own local academic traditions, highlighted the wide variety of entry points available for a radical retelling of post-revolutionary Libyan history. Allowing for the gathering of a multiplicity of languages and frameworks of scholarships was not without its own risk. However, in this case, two factors helped to make the diversity of language and research frameworks a strength, and not a hindrance. First, the papers presented were kept short, allocating the bulk of the time for questions and clarifications to be made in order to bridge the linguistic, as well as, the rhetorical gaps, which might have existed between the different scholars. Second, once that took place, not limiting the participants to communicate their ideas in English helped to bring the experiences, theoretical frameworks, and ideas from outside of English-language academia to the center of the discussion. French, Arabic and English became the languages of discussion, in most cases understood by all participants, and when needed, translations were provided in an informal fashion. What emerged was a truly trans-national discussion, reflecting the multiplicity of languages and archival sources available for a new generation of history writing of both North Africa and the Middle East at large.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, the diverse participants who came together to discuss common interests and express their passion for the renewal of the field will help build connections that promise a reinvigorated trans-local collaborative research efforts and future conferences and workshops to come in Tripoli, Berlin, and other centers of academic inquiry. Three clear themes for further collaborative research emerged. The first was with a call for the re-examination of the Sanussiyya based on a multiplicity of records which are available in European, Ottoman, and Libyan archives. Long serving as a corner stone of Libyan nationalist narratives, a revision of the history of the Sanusi order would go a long way towards a revision of Libyan historiography. The relevance of the history of the Sanusi order to current political events in Libya was emphasized by Dr. Edeek and echoed by other historians who work on the Sanusi order whether their focus was the 19th or 20th century.

The second theme was one related to the use of Ottoman biographies (in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, and modern Turkish) and travelogues, which have recently started to come to researchers' attention, available in manuscript as well as printed form. A serious study of what is looking like a whole Ottoman genre of what could be described as "ethnographic" description of Ottoman Africa would go a long way towards tackling questions of imperial policies and colonial discourse within the Ottoman context, particularly in the so-called frontier provinces, such as that of the Libyan provinces.

Third, the historiographical questions, which have repeatedly come up throughout the workshop, beg a closer examination. Where does the writing of the history of North Africa stand at this point in time? Has the so called “postcolonial moment” passed and what implications does that have on the process of research and writing in the Ottoman context? Can or should the political and the academic be divorced from one another in the writing of post-colonial nation-states? Are we, as a few historians at the workshop have suggested, at the stage of a so-called “return to the sources” while consciously embodying the last two decades of post-colonial theoretical disentanglement from colonial narratives?

In the end, if the sign of a good workshop is one that produces more questions than answers, then I humbly submit that this workshop was a true success.

Participants:

Mohammed Edeek (University of Tripoli)

Emna Elaouni (ENAU, Tunis)

Güneş Işıksel (Collège de France, Paris)

Suad Mohammed al-Jaffal (University of Tripoli)

Jakob Kraus (Freie Universität Berlin)

Nora Lafi (ZMO)

Mostafa Minawi (EUME-Fellow 2011/12)

Eileen Ryan (Columbia University)

Henning Sievert (Universität Bonn)

Ebubekir Subaşı (The Prime Ministerial Ottoman Archives, Istanbul)

Salaheddin H. Sury (Centre for National Archives and Historical Studies, Tripoli)

Knut S. Vikør (University of Bergen)

Mostafa Minawi (EUME Fellow 2011/12) – Berlin, June 15, 2012