

Micro-narrative and the Historiography of the Modern Middle East

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Abstract

Most recent scholarship on the early-20th-century Eastern Arab World (*Mashriq*) has been preoccupied with locating the words and actions of historical actors into one or more of three overarching and interconnected (post-colonial) themes: colonialism, nationalism, and modernity. As a result, historians have produced very few micro-narratives whose protagonists are individuals from the region and which take as their starting point the prosaic concerns of daily life. What explains this historiographical trend? The relative scarcity of micro-narratives is due to a number of factors, including challenges in using particular genres of Arabic source-materials, as well as the impact of Edward Said's *Orientalism* generally and post-colonial concerns about narrative as a mode of representation in particular. Two fragments from the life-story of an early-20th-century Arab soldier are introduced in order to show how these factors play out in the crafting of a micro-narrative.

Compared to historians of Europe and North America, those working on the history of the early 20th-century *Mashriq* (what is today Syria, Jordan, Palestine/Israel, Lebanon, and Iraq) have produced relatively few micro-narratives whose protagonists are the people of the region. Where is the level of human detail found in classics such as Alan Taylor's *William Cooper's Town*, or Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre* or even – to take a non-Western example – Susan Mann's *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family*? This essay tries to explain this absence and tease out its implications.¹

In the 32 years since its publication, Edward Said's *Orientalism* has reverberated in each of the disciplines that collectively constitute Middle East Studies, including history. The book had positive effects that those of us in the field know well. It forced us to take seriously the reality of the power relations produced and reinforced by British and French colonialism, and to detect the way in which those power relations are reflected in texts. Partly as a result of Said's work, most recent historians of the Middle East have produced scholarship that is strongly critical of the British and French colonial projects in the region. These are works that have exposed the power of colonialism to destroy not only lived lives but also imagined futures. Some historians have also shown how the independent states of the 20th-century Arab Middle East were largely continuations, rather than ruptures with, their immediate colonial pasts. And, in general, most recent historians of the Arab Middle East have drawn the lesson that they must steer clear of employing general oppositions – secular vs. religious, traditional vs. modern, Sunni vs. Shi'ite – as explanations for historical events, when these essentializing binaries inevitably collapse under the weight of counter examples.

Examples of such works include: Joseph Massad's *Colonial Effects*, Elizabeth Thompson's *Colonial Citizens*, Toby Dodge's *Inventing Iraq*, Jim Gelvin's *Divided Loyalties*, Keith Watenpaugh's *Being Modern in the Middle East*, Martin Bunton's *Colonial Land Policies in Palestine*, Ellen Fleischmann's *The Nation and its 'New' Women*, and Rashid Khalidi's

Palestinian Identity. These well-crafted pieces of scholarship are concerned primarily with locating the words and actions of historical actors into one (or more) of the three over-arching and interconnected (post-colonial) themes that have recently dominated the historical study of the early 20th-century *Mashriq*: colonialism, nationalism, and modernity. By contrast, less than a handful of histories take as their starting points the more prosaic concerns of daily life: money, family, friendship, professional networks, schools, food, and leisure. Why is so little attention paid to evening soirees in the wealthy neighborhoods of Beirut in 1923, full of descriptions of furnishings, food, gossip, and the book of the month? To the ex-Ottoman soldiers turned anti-colonial rebels meeting with Syrian tribal leaders to plan rebellion in the hills outside Hama in October 1925? Or to the exams, professors, rivalries and friendships that filled the days of students at the Iraqi Royal Medical College in 1932?² In my classes, I tend to assign translated Arabic novels as a way of circumventing this lacuna. Novels set in the past, by authors such as Hanna Mina, Ulfat Idibli, Elias Khoury, and Iman Humaydan Younes among others, help to lead my students through the intimate aspects of their protagonist's lives. They include descriptions of the interiors of houses, landscape, food, family, city streets, mountain journeys, private desires, and public disputes. If British or French (or American) characters feature at all, they are often just props, two-dimensional and laughably ignorant about the world that they find themselves in. But using contemporary Arabic novels in a class on the modern history of the *Mashriq* is fraught. This is because no piece of literature, including contemporary Arabic novels, is a transparent window on society; instead, they should be taken seriously as works of art, approached with the tools of literary criticism, and analyzed from the perspective of voice, form, technique, and so on. These novels cannot stand in for our missing micro-narratives, even though it is tempting to use them this way.³

In the field of Middle East Studies, therefore, we face an odd disjunction. Some historians use literature as a way of speaking back to the domineering voices coming from the colonial archives; but in so doing they treat literary texts unreflectively, as sources for what they can tell us about modern Arab societies. At the same time, most scholars of contemporary Arabic literature are pushing in the opposite direction, rejecting this instrumentalism and insisting that complex artistic productions such as novels require training in literary theory to be understood. (As Stephen Sheehi points out in his *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, New Historicism has yet to have a major impact on the field of Middle East Studies). It also might surprise historians of other parts of the world to learn that only a handful of serious scholarly biographies of Arabs have been written in English.⁴

There are straightforward reasons for the relative absence of micro-narratives in the historiography of the Modern Arab Middle East. One relates to the availability and nature of the historian's sources. The richness of the colonial archives (British, French, and Israeli) and their traditions of (relatively) open access to government documents have cast in shadow the small, under-funded state archives of Syria and Lebanon for example. This stark difference in the quantity of accessible documents cannot be denied. Nor can it be circumvented by appealing to the many modern memoirs written in Arabic. Although these Arabic memoirs compete in terms of number with the corpus of colonial memoirs, they generally conform to the genre of public memoir and autobiography that emerges from anti-colonial nationalisms. In other words, many Arabic memoirs (from the colonial or just post-colonial period), like many Indian memoirs, self-consciously play a role in constructing anti-colonial national narratives, instead of yielding up what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the endlessly interiorized subject of modern Western memoirs and autobiographies.⁵ Chakrabarty states that you cannot write 'French' social history with Indian sources. Likewise, you cannot write 'French' social history with Syrian sources.⁶

Yet another factor accounts for the relative paucity of micro-narratives of the early 20th-century *Mashriq*. Writing a micro-narrative is different from taking a cluster of colonial memoranda and memoirs (including Arabic memoirs) and subjecting them to discourse analysis in an effort to determine which kind of texts these are: Orientalist, Modern, or Nationalist. Writing a micro-narrative history is also different from deploying these sources (and others) in an effort to address big historical questions such as: what was the nature of the French colonial state in Syria? Or, where did Jordanian nationalism draw its authenticity from? By contrast, a micro-narrative demands close description, compelling plot, fleshed-out protagonists, and gripping action. Without these elements, the micro-narrative loses its forward momentum and ceases to be a good story. Given that the historian is not a novelist, she must of course remain committed to what the sources say. This is what philosophers of narrative call ‘truth commitment’ or ‘obligation to evidence’. But constructing description, plot, protagonists, and action, inevitably involves manipulating the sources – distilling them, interpreting them, ordering them – in the larger effort to create something new. The sources serve as the building blocks of a novel story; they are not treated as texts.⁷ The need for the author of a micro-narrative to take command of the sources and deploy them as part of an original narrative strategy, requires that the (supposedly) post-Orientalist historian step away from discourse analysis and take up a more authoritative command of the sources. What I am *not* advocating, however, is a return to the distant, cold-eyed gaze of the colonialist functionary or the Orientalist expert. Indeed, the superficially similar approaches of these two distinct projects – narrative history on the one hand, Colonialist and Orientalist discourse on the other – may have steered some younger scholars away from micro-narrative. The worry, of course, is that they be stripped of the much desired label of *post-Orientalist* and branded instead with the dreaded *neo-Orientalist*.

Qawuqji



Figure 1.

My current book project focuses on the life of Fawzi al-Qawuqji, a soldier who served as an officer in the Ottoman army during World War I; fought against the French in Syria during the rebellion of 1925–1927; fought against the British in Mandatory Palestine during the Arab Revolt of 1936–1939, and again in Iraq during the Rashid ‘Ali Coup of 1941; lived in exile in Nazi Germany during World War II; and served as a Field Commander of the Arab Salvation Army (Jaysh al-inqadh) against the Haganah/IDF during the 1948 Arab–Israeli War. The photograph (Figure 1), taken some time in March 1948, before the fall of any Palestinian cities to the Haganah, shows Qawuqji surveying the West Bank town of Tubas.⁸ Using Qawuqji’s own personal archive to construct a detailed historical narrative of the journey that he made through certain pivotal moments, I hope to offer a glimpse of the complexity and contingency of the historical worlds he inhabited. It is my experience of grappling with the difficulties of writing this narrative that have led me to the arguments about narrative history laid out above. Let me offer two examples from my book project that allow me to be more specific about what I mean. The first example – ‘Journey Down the Tigris’ – illustrates the problems in using Arabic memoir as a source. The second example – ‘School’ – shows the difficulties of synthesizing multiple sources into a single narrative that claims to evoke aspects of daily life in detail.⁹

JOURNEY DOWN THE TIGRIS

Qawuqji graduated from the Ottoman Military Academy (or War College, *Mekteb-i Harbiye*) in 1912 with a specialization in cavalry. In his memoirs, he devotes only a few pages to his time in the academy, but the thread of his narrative in these few pages is one of moving from being an Ottoman subject, who felt himself to have the same relationship to the Ottoman state as his Turkish speaking peers, to feeling that he had a distinct identity as an Arab. This feeling of being an Arab was concomitant with a growing awareness that many of his peers felt themselves to be Turkish rather than Ottoman. To illustrate this point, he tells a story of a fight in the academy one day, between a group of Turkish soldiers and a group of Arab soldiers:

... and I heard one of them saying with great enthusiasm and seriousness ‘I am Turkish’, and the other reply immediately with pride ‘I am Arab’, and the Arab students rushed to support their colleague. And it was as if this moment of truth, which was released into the skies above the War College, put an end to the bond that had tied us to the Ottoman state. From that moment we began to feel that we had an independent Arab nation and that behind it was the nation and a history and a time-honored glory.¹⁰

As Qawuqji tells it, therefore, he graduated from the Academy with an already developed sense of what it meant to be an Arab. It was the custom of the Ottoman army at that time to assign some graduating officers to a particular corps by the drawing of lots. Qawuqji drew a corps stationed in Mosul in 1912, as did his close friend from the War College, Ahmad Mukhtar al-Tarabulsi, who would be later killed fighting against the British in Tripoli during World War I. The normal route from Istanbul to Mosul was southeast through Aleppo and Dayr al-Zur. The two friends decided to go a different way. They went by boat from Istanbul to Samsun on the northern coast of Anatolia and then by wagon due south to Diyar Bakr. From Diyar Bakr, they took a *kalak* – a raft made of goatskins that were stretched and filled with air – down the Tigris to Mosul. The journey took 53 days, 41 days from Istanbul to Diyar Bakr and 12 days on the river between Diyar Bakr and Mosul.¹¹

Qawuqji describes this trip in detail, and, in his self-narrative, it stands as a metaphor of his journey from Ottomanism to Arabism. He tells how he and al-Tarabulsi decided to take this alternative route across Anatolia because they wanted to acquaint themselves with the traditions of the Turkish people living in Anatolia, and then to compare them with traditions of the Arabs through whose lands they would pass as they moved south along the Tigris toward Mosul. Qawuqji describes the experience of encountering different groups of people along the way and realizing with increasing clarity that there was a substantial difference between the Turkish- and Arabic-speaking peoples. As they floated south down the Tigris, and the rocky hills of central Anatolia gave way to the rolling grasslands of the countryside north of Mosul, the people living on the banks of the river rushing out to greet them were speaking Arabic, not Turkish:

The sights of Anatolia and its houses passed by us in a uniform way, until we got back onto the raft again and it took us southwards with the flow of the Tigris. We found ourselves in a new world: the Arab *qaba'il* (tribes) living on the banks of the river provided us with what we needed and gave to us the fruits of their lands. They would sing to us and recite poetry, poetry of war and poetry of the nation: songs and poems that stirred our spirits. For this was our language, heard in so many different dialects, and this was a shared feeling. These Arab customs showed them in every way to be part of our nation.¹²

In all likelihood, Qawuqji dictated this passage in his apartment in Beirut more than 60 years after he had made his journey down the Tigris during interviews with the compiler of his memoirs Khayriyya Qasimiyya. His memoir was composed after all the major events of his career: after his close friend Ahmad was killed by the British at Tripoli; after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire; after Qawuqji had fought against the French occupation of Syria in the great Syrian revolt of 1925–1927; after his few months fighting against the British in Palestine in 1936; and after the 1948 Arab–Israeli War. If I wanted to move away from my narrative and analyze the passage, I could turn for help – as I say above – to the work of Chakrabarty and others. Again, the passage I have selected above is a clear example of Chakrabarty's designation of the genre of memoir and autobiography that emerges from anti-colonial nationalisms as primarily *public*, as part of the construction of the public national narrative, rather than yielding what he calls 'the endlessly interiorized subject'.¹³

The romantic image of the Arab *qaba'il* living on the banks of the Tigris, of people rushing out to greet the two officers on their *kalak* with bountiful offerings and songs of war and nation, seems less connected to a private account of an experience of travel than it does to Qawuqji's particular rendering of a public story of Arab nationalism. One of the main components of Qawuqji's brand of nationalism is the notion that the *qaba'il* are the essence of the Arab nation. To say all this, however, does not require that we be skeptical of Qawuqji's claims that he really experienced some feeling of kinship when he heard the people on the banks of the river speaking Arabic rather than Turkish, and that their customs were, by his reckoning, more akin to his own than those of the Turkish villagers he had encountered earlier. And yet one suspects that this young man – who had spent his early childhood in an urban environment in the port city of Tripoli, and his young adulthood in the Military Academy in Istanbul where he was taught in Turkish and surrounded by fellow cadets who came from all corners of the Ottoman Empire – probably had a more prosaic encounter with a *qabila* on the banks of the Tigris than his lyrical description implies. Where is Qawuqji's anxiety that the rains might swell the waters of the Tigris to such a degree that it would be dangerous to continue? Where is his pre-occupation with ensuring that they had enough food to last the rest of the

journey? Where are his growing feelings of intimacy (or irritation) with his friend, who shared the grueling journey with him for over 40 days? These details are absent because the story of 1912 that Qawuqji is telling from the vantage point of the 1970s (when many of his memories were recorded) is so much more important to him than what probably seemed to him like trivial issues. Qawuqji's journey took him through the lands of the Ottoman Empire when there were no borders to cross and when the main delineations were between languages and religions. For Qawuqji, it was also a time when the internal dynamic of the Ottoman polity was beginning to show signs of reconfiguring itself along national lines; 1912 was, after all, smack in the middle of the Balkan wars of independence. From the viewpoint of the 1970s, 1912 stands out as a moment in history when the Arab nation was emerging toward what must have seemed like its natural fulfillment. The people of the *qabila* rushing out to greet Qawuqji on the banks of the Tigris, and the Arabness that they represented, probably seemed to the Qawuqji of the 1970s as a painful glimpse back, at a possible future now lost.

Using the ideas of Chakrabarty is one way that a historian such as myself can approach a text like Qawuqji's memoirs. But if I were to pursue this method throughout the text of the memoirs, then which issues would that raise for me? It would turn my project into a string of textual analyses. Treating the memoir passage more as 'text' than as 'source' leaves me floundering without much 'history' out there to grab on to. I am not sure that it lets me tell my story of Qawuqji's journey down the Tigris in 1912 at all. After all there seems at first glance to be an unavoidable contradiction between saying that 'such-and-such a passage is a source that undergirds this historical story', and saying that 'such-and-such a passage is a text that is subject to literary-critical analyses'. However much I might pay lip service to the idea that all sources are texts, it is crucial to my project that Qawuqji's account of his journey down the Tigris in 1912 is at some level true, that it somehow corresponds to reality. By this I mean that passages such as these can serve as sources for a historical narrative. They are not simply texts that tell us something about how the genre of soldier-nationalist writing being produced from the 1960s until today constructs the history of Arab nationalism. As a discipline history is often quite reckless and optimistic. But history does allow us to be storytellers, who can convey new and unexpected aspects of human experience; and this, in turn, helps release us from the head-spinning anxieties of our post-linguistic-turn world. But practically speaking, we can only do this if we still maintain a strategic loyalty to the notion of historical source, and particularly to that source's correspondence to material reality.

SCHOOL

In my second example – 'School' – and in the analysis that follows, I describe how the act of synthesizing sources into a new narrative can look like the cold-eyed distance of a colonialist functionary or an Orientalist expert.

'I opened my eyes in the world and found myself in the Ottoman school system'. This sentence begins Qawuqji's memoirs. His childhood games with his brothers in the alley outside his home in Tripoli, his mother's cooking, the lemon trees and orange trees at the house in al-Minya, his journeys to Beirut and Damascus to visit his extended family, and his memories of eating Bufinjan with his father on a trip to Libya – none of these is included in his telling of the story of his life. He saw himself as a product of the new Hamidian Ottoman school system. What happened inside the walls of his schools – from elementary and preparatory school to the War College in Istanbul – shaped his sense of

his place in the world and his perception of the professional and personal choices available to him.¹⁴

At the War College in Istanbul, Qawuqji slept at night in a raised bed in a long gallery dormitory with dozens of other boys, listening to the horns of steamships moving slowly up and down the Bosphorus just half a mile from the windows in his dormitory. In the mornings, he washed and dressed in his formal cadet's uniform, stiff wool trousers and a frock coat with a high collar. Tucked into an inside pocket was a small copy of the Quran that his grandmother had given to him. Meals were eaten in the large dining room at long raised tables laid with separate plates and knives and forks. The food was simple and quite spartan – stewed beans, mutton, and rice – except during Ramadan, when special feasts were prepared and Ramadan sweets were handed out. In addition to the daily rhythm of congregational prayers in the War College's mosque, Qawuqji spent much of his day sitting at a wooden desk facing a blackboard and being taught the standard curriculum, either by a staff officer or by an *'alim* (religious scholar). The curriculum, taught mainly in Ottoman Turkish, included classes on oratory, theology, and ethics, military theory and history, and German and French.

The walls of his classroom were lined with paintings of military heroes: Mehmet the Conqueror, who captured Constantinople from the Byzantine Empire in 1453, stood next to portraits of Napoleon and Bismarck. And, in each classroom, there was a map, printed by the military, showing the lands of the Ottoman Empire: from the Balkans in the North West to Mesopotamia in the East, and Egypt, Sudan, and the Arabian Peninsula to the South. The great metropolis of Istanbul, the home of the War College itself, lay at center of these maps. Often the maps did not reflect the true extent of Ottoman territorial control. The Balkans had effectively been lost by the end of the 19th century, and Egypt was now ruled by the British Empire, which pressed every day against the borders of Ottoman control. Many of the cadets knew that there was a difference between the representation in their classroom and the reality on the ground, and this difference served as a constant reminder that the Ottoman Empire was besieged by increasingly aggressive French and British incursions. Some maps also included the new systems of communication then being built by the Ottoman state, such as the telegraph. By the early 1900s, the Ottoman railway could take you from Istanbul to Ankara and Konya in central Anatolia, and onwards to Damascus. In addition, 400 miles of new line pushed south from Damascus into the Hejaz, and a branch line connected Damascus and Haifa.

Some parts of the curriculum, such as cavalry practice, took Qawuqji out of the classroom to the hills that lay just beyond the city. Officers in training were often given decades-old German Mauser rifles and were not allowed to use live ammunition. The few Ottoman cadets who were sent to Germany for training spread rumors of different training practices beyond the borders of the Ottoman Empire. Everything in Germany, it seemed, was so elaborately and precisely organized. German cadets ate good food in ornate dining rooms, wore uniforms made of fine cloth, and danced with pretty girls in elegant ballrooms. Most impressively, they trained in battle scenarios using the latest model of the Mauser – loaded with live ammunition.

The cadets at the War College were almost all Sunni Muslims, who came from virtually every province of the Ottoman Empire. In his memoirs, Qawuqji speaks of his Arab, Turkish, Albanian, and Circassian peers, looking up to the Ottoman Sultan as their leader. They shared a sense of being part of a new class of Ottoman soldiers who would go on to spend their professional lives making a career in the Ottoman army. But divisions were still felt. In some instances, the teachers treated the Turkish-speaking cadets from Istanbul with greater deference than was received by the Arabic-speaking cadets from the

Arab provinces. Qawuqji recounted in later years that certain cadets were sometimes served better food than him, and that when he asked why this was the case, he was told that it was because he was an Arab.

The War College was an imposing neo-classical building built in stone. It stood on a hill overlooking the Bosphorus. The barracks of Tashkishla, which served as the city's garrison, lay to the south of the College. The walled palace of Abdul Hamid II lay to the north, and the cadets could see the older palaces and gardens of Dolmabahçe and Chirigan on the shore of the Bosphorus below. The bars and restaurants of the European district of Beyoğlu were within walking distance, as was the harbor area of Galata, whose side streets were famous for brothels worked by Christian prostitutes. Cadets often snuck out for a night on the town, sneaking past the college monitors lest they get caught and lose points on the section of their report card labeled 'moral conduct'. The cadets swept past institutions built in the same neo-classical style and with the same dressed stone as the college itself: the railway station at Haydarpaşa, the customs office at the port where the steamships docked, and Abdul Hamid II's new municipal buildings. All of these would have made them feel like participants in the Empire's new direction.¹⁵

This photograph of officers (Figure 2) and cadets gathered in front of the War College captures a sense of their self-confidence about the future. Taken by a photographer from the famous Abdallah Frères Studio in the early 1890s (just a decade or so before Qawuqji's time at the War College), the photograph was included in a series of albums commissioned by Abdul Hamid II to record and promote his vision of the new Ottoman Empire.¹⁶

DESCRIPTIVE ADJECTIVES: SUNNI OFFICERS

Using an adjective that denotes a religious sect to describe a particular group (Sunni officers) runs the risk of evoking an Orientalist discourse that has sought to explain past

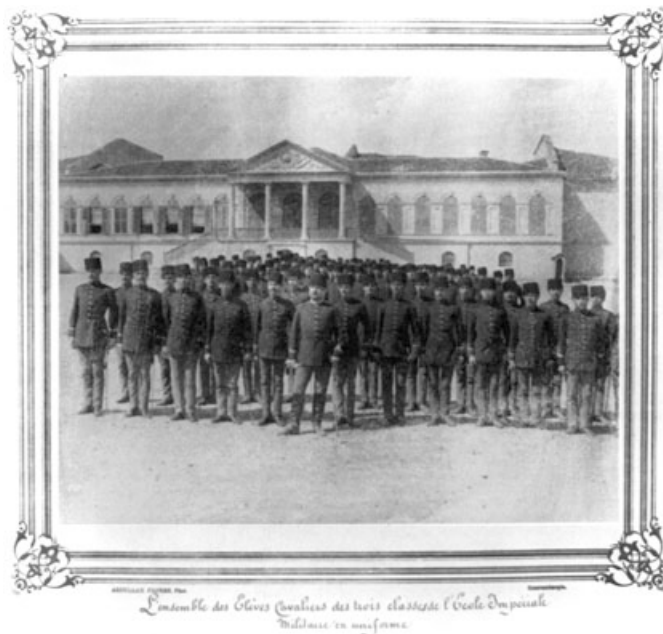


Figure 2.

events in the Middle East by locating historical actors in a sectarian taxonomy. This kind of reductionist analysis creates a distorted image: of a region peopled by automata, whose every action is driven by their *sunni-ness* or their *shi'ite-ness* or their *christian-ness*. In the last 20 years or so, thoughtful historians have focused on how the sect is in large part a colonialist and Orientalist construct; Ussama Makdisi's work on 19th- and early 20th-century Lebanon is a good example of this new approach to sectarianism.¹⁷ But if the only way to overcome this inherited curse is to discard religious sect entirely and banish it from the range of factors that might have motivated a particular historical actor at a particular time and in a particular place, we will ourselves be 'photoshopping' the historical reality of – in the case of my project – a world of *Sunni* Ottoman cadets in the late 19th-century Ottoman Empire. The fact that these young men came from Sunni families gave them a leg-up in the struggle for professional advancement. True, Shi'ites or Christians or Druze were occasionally accepted into Abdul Hamid II's new military schools. But they had a harder time succeeding in a military profession that was dominated by Sunnis. Sunni does not mean 'sect' at this time and in this place; instead, it means a particular social network that was evolving into a professional network. My use of Sunni is also meant to complement other adjectives that I have chosen to describe Qawuqji's fellow cadets: young, male, of modest means, and so on.

DETAILS: THE QURAN IN HIS POCKET

A micro-narrative will not work without vivid details. Through these details, the reader is transported to a world far away in time, and inhabits the world, however glancingly. This is why historical novels can be so compelling. Needless to say, the novelist has more freedom than the historian to describe dirt under fingernails, the feel of a certain kind of cloth, or the scent of the hills just outside Istanbul on a spring morning in, say, 1902. In her famous article on the art of biography, Virginia Woolf contrasts the way the biographer is hampered by facts, with the relative freedom of the novelist:

The invented character lives in a free world where the facts are verified by one person only – the artist himself. Their authenticity lies in the truth of his own vision. The world created by that vision is rarer, intenser, and more wholly of a piece than the world that is largely made of authentic information supplied by other people.¹⁸

But in the case of micro-narrative, the sources do occasionally provide subtle details that can make such a difference in narrative history writing. If you are a historian of the Arab Middle East, some of these details might appear, at first glance, to confirm Western stereotypes about the region. Many soldiers in the Ottoman army, though certainly not all, carried small copies of the Quran in their clothes. This practice was – at some basic level – akin (though certainly not identical) to British soldiers carrying a miniature bible, or wearing a St Christopher medallion. But including it in an account of the life of a Sunni Arab soldier is to risk evoking images of jihad and martyrdom in the mind of the contemporary Western reader. The historian of the Middle East therefore must think carefully about how to embed such a detail in an account of the daily lives of Ottoman soldiers such as Qawuqji.

Writing narrative history of the modern Arab *Mashriq* is full of traps such as these. But it is possible to detect them and (on the whole) avoid falling into them. Details from micro-narratives can also support or undermine large-scale hypotheses put forward by social and economic historians. Recent scholars of the late 19th-century professional classes in Istanbul, for example, have moved away from an analytical structure that casts classes of people

as either ‘traditional/Ottoman’ on the one hand or ‘modern/Western’ on the other.¹⁹ My piece of micro-narrative above supports this trend by reproducing certain aspects of daily life for an Ottoman cadet: a life that included being taught Islamic ethics and German military strategy as part of the same curriculum; a life where morality was an important category of evaluation but also routinely transgressed; a life that included sitting on chairs in front of desks arranged by rows in addition to sitting in a discussion circle on the floor of the War College’s mosque; and a life where certain things in the Europe seemed better – the latest Mauser rifle for example – but where the wholesale adoption of European culture did not even occur to most people to want. Human-level details conveyed in a micro-narrative can be effective in dismantling stale categories of analysis, just as the statistical evidence adduced by the social and economic historian can be – not in the same way, of course, but as a complementary rather than competing mode of critique.

To sum up: writing new narrative histories of the modern Arab Middle East – especially micro-narratives – should be a major desideratum, despite the potential for misunderstanding. One misunderstanding is that any scholar engaged in such a project is intellectually naïve in treating texts such as memoirs as sources that are solid enough to undergird a new historical narrative. Another misunderstanding is that by moving away from the textual analysis of individual sources, and toward the marshalling of those sources into some kind of narrative order, one will inevitably fall into the trap of generalization and essentialization. What I have tried to show is that fleshing out the lived details of the early 20th-century people of the *Mashriq* through carefully told micro-narratives is one effective way to critique Colonialism. These stories expose the cherished futures that in many cases were thwarted or distorted by British and French colonial power. And they do it intuitively, because narrative is the structure that governs how we make sense of our lives in the world.

Acknowledgement

Portions of this paper were delivered at: the Middle East Studies Association Conference (Boston, 2006); the School of Oriental and African Studies (London, 2008), and the University of California at San Diego (2010). My thanks to Michelle Hartman, my colleague at McGill, for reading the MESA paper and for our discussions about it. In addition, I would like to thank Ayman Desouky (SOAS) and Michael Provence (UCSD) for inviting me to give these talks and for their helpful comments on the oral presentations. Thanks also to Benjamin Fortna (SOAS), Paul Sedra (Simon Fraser), and the anonymous History Compass reviewers for their helpful comments.

Short Biography

Laila Parsons is an Associate Professor in the Department of History and the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University. She previously taught in the Department of History at Yale University. She holds a DPhil in Modern Middle Eastern Studies from Oxford University. She is a historian of the early-20th-century Middle East. She has published a book (*The Druze Between Palestine and Israel, 1947–1949* (London, 2000)) and several articles on the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, including a chapter in A. Shlaim and E. Rogan (eds.), *The War for Palestine* (Cambridge, 2007) in which she critiques Benny Morris’ influential argument that the Palestinian refugee crisis was ‘born of war, not by design’. Her current book project is a study of the life and times of Fawzi al-Qawuqji, a career soldier who fought against colonialism across the Middle East between 1914 and 1948. The book will

be published with Hill and Wang in 2011. For a recent article on Qawuqji, see Laila Parsons, 'Soldiering for Arab Nationalism: Fawzi al-Qawuqji in Palestine', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 36/4 (Summer, 2007), 33–48.

Notes

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¹ A. Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); S. Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); N. Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983). In his influential essay on the revival of narrative, Peter Burke calls this kind of history 'micro-narrative', and 'the telling of a story about ordinary people in their local setting' (P. Burke, 'History of events and the revival of narrative' in P. Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001)), 292. For my purposes, it is Burke's description of micro-narrative as the 'telling of a story' that is most relevant. In the field of the history of the early 20th-century *Mashriq*, we have few micro-narratives, whether of ordinary people or important people.

² E. Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); T. Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); J. Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); K. Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); R. Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); M. Bunton, *Colonial Land Policies in Palestine, 1917–1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); E. Fleischmann, *The Nation and its 'New' Women: The Palestine Women's Movement, 1920–1948* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003); J. Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). When I say that there are few detailed narrative histories of the early 20th-century *Mashriq*, I am describing a general trend. There are, of course, exceptions: M. Provenca, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005) is a compelling narrative history of the Great Syrian Revolt. In addition, there are some valuable social histories of the early 20th-century *Mashriq*, which contain detailed narratives of individual lives. One classic example (re-published by Saqi Books in 2004) is H. Batatu's *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: a Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Bathists, and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). Recently published broader narrative histories, such as E. Rogan, *The Arabs: A History* (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2009), and P. Seale, *The Struggle for Arab Independence: Riad el-Solh and the Makers of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), contain sections of detailed narratives of the people of the early 20th-century *Mashriq*. Tom Segev's, *One Palestine Complete: Jews and Arabs Under the British Mandate* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000) is precisely the kind of detailed narrative history that I am talking about, but it suffers from a lack of Arab characters; on this see: L. Parsons, 'Soldiering for Arab nationalism: Fawzi al-Qawuqji in Palestine', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 36/4 (Summer, 2007), 33–48; at 33–4.

³ Novels that I have used in class include: H. Mina, *Fragments of Memory: A Story of a Syrian Family*, translated by L. Kenney and O. Kenney (Northampton, MA: Interlink, 2004); U. Idibli, *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet*, translated by Peter Clarke (Northampton, MA: Interlink, 1997); E. Khoury, *Gate of the Sun: A Novel*, translated by H. Davies (New York: Picador, 2006); I. H. Younes, *Wild Mulberries*, translated by Michelle Hartman (Northampton, MA: Interlink, 2008).

⁴ Michelle Hartman first pointed out to me the problems involved in using modern Arabic literature in the classroom to stand in for history. My thanks to her for our discussions about this. For the observation that New Historicism has not had a major impact on the historiography of the Middle East, see S. Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004), 109. My thanks to my student, Hussam Eldin Ahmed, for pointing out Sheehi's observation to me.

⁵ D. Chakrabarty, 'Chapter 1: Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?', *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27–46. This argument does not intersect with reductionist theories of the 'absence of self' in Arab culture. For a good critique of this discourse see D. Reynolds (ed.), *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 35. Chakrabarty's well-known appeal to historians to find ways of 'provincializing Europe' resonates with those working on the history of the Middle East; see 'Introduction: The Idea of Provincializing Europe', in *Provincializing Europe*, 3–23.

⁷ The literature on narrative is vast. For a succinct explanation of the difference between fictional narrative and historical narrative, see Louis Mink, 'History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension', *New Literary History*, 1/3 (Spring, 1970), 541–58. Mink says: 'A historical narrative does not demonstrate the necessity of events but makes them intelligible by unfolding the story which connects their significance. History does not as such differ from fiction, therefore, insofar as it essentially depends on and develops our skill and subtlety in following stories. History does of course differ from fiction insofar as it is obligated to rest upon evidence of the occurrence in real space and time of what it describes and insofar as it must grow out of a critical assessment of the received materials of history, including the analyses and interpretations of other historians'. 545.

⁸ The photograph is the courtesy of the Library of the Institute of Palestine Studies, Beirut.

⁹ The book, which will be published by Hill and Wang in 2011, is based on Qawuqji's private papers. Qawuqji's family generously allowed me to access these papers.

¹⁰ K. Qasimiyya (ed.), *Mudhakkirat Fawzi al-Qawuqji* [The Memoirs of Fawzi al-Qawuqji] (Damascus: Dar al-Namir, 1995), 16.

¹¹ Qawuqji describes the raft in some detail: it was made out of goatskins stretched and then filled with air. On top of the raft was a small storage unit for them to keep their belongings. Qawuqji does not describe the wagon that they used to cross Anatolia except to say that it was pulled by a pair of overly thin horses. Ja'far al-'Askari, an Arab army officer who went to the same academy as Qawuqji a few years earlier (he graduated in 1904), and who ended up joining the Arab Revolt of 1916, describes a similar journey down the Tigris in a *kalak* in 1897. But his journey was from Mosul to Baghdad, so that he and his brother could go to the Ottoman military school in Baghdad. He was later transferred to Istanbul. See W. Facey and N. J. Safwat (eds.), *A Soldier's Story: From Ottoman Rule to Independent Iraq: The Memoirs of Jafar Pasha al-Askari* (London: Arabian Publishing, 2003), 15–7. Al-'Askari also confirms that the normal route for officers in the Ottoman army traveling between Baghdad and Istanbul was by the Euphrates, not the Tigris, and the stopping points on the way were Dayr al-Zur, Aleppo, and then finally Alexandria, where they could board a boat to Istanbul.

¹² Qasimiyya, *Mudhakkirat Fawzi al-Qawuqji*, 18.

¹³ Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History', 35.

¹⁴ Qasimiyya, *Mudhakkirat Fawzi al-Qawuqji*, 15.

¹⁵ For description of life in the Ottoman school system, I have relied on B. Fortna, *Imperial Classroom: Islam, Education, and the State in the late Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), chapters 4, 5, and 6; Andrew Mango, *Ataturk* (London: John Murray, 2004), chapter 2; Facey and Safwat (eds.), *A Soldier's Story*, 15–9; and Qasimiyya, *Mudhakkirat Fawzi al-Qawuqji*, 15–7. Information about his childhood and his habit of carrying a small Quran comes from conversations with members of his family. The story about being given inferior food because he was an Arab comes from Rita Awad, who worked as Qawuqji's assistant when he was working on his memoirs in the 1970s. For more on the Mauser rifle and the Ottoman army, see J. Grant, 'The Sword of the Sultan: Ottoman Arms Imports, 1854–1914', *Journal of Military History*, 66/1 (2002), 9–36 (24).

¹⁶ Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Abdul Hamid II Collection (LC-USZ62-82202).

¹⁷ U. Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

¹⁸ V. Woolf, 'The art of biography', in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942).

¹⁹ A useful overview of recent historiography of the Ottoman Empire, which breaks down the old Orientalist binary of tradition v. modernity and challenges the paradigm of 'Ottoman decline', is N. Doumanis, 'Durable Empire: State Virtuosity and Social Accommodation in the Ottoman Mediterranean', *The Historical Journal*, 49/3 (2006), 953–66. As Doumanis points out, the text that 'is most often cited as betraying the hallmarks of Orientalism' is H. A. R. Gibb and H. Bowen, *Islamic Society and the West: A Study of the Impact of Western Civilization on Moslem Culture in the Near East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950). S. Faroqhi's *Subjects of the Sultan: Culture and Daily Life in the Ottoman Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000) is a detailed narrative history of daily practices, which shows how problematic it is to reduce people to the categories 'traditional' or 'western'.

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