

THE MIDDLE EAST AND EUROPE

ENCOUNTERS AND EXCHANGES

*edited
by
Geert Jan van Gelder
and
Ed de Moor*



Amsterdam - Atlanta, GA 1992

INTRODUCTION

BY

NIKOLAOS VAN DAM

Ambassador of the Netherlands in Cairo

Dutch scholars have a long tradition in studying the Middle East and Islam. Their works have become widely known over the past few centuries through a varied number of publications, both in the Netherlands and elsewhere. In the post-colonial era, the past quarter-century in particular, general interest in the Netherlands in the Middle East and Islam has been substantially expanded across different academic disciplines. This gave rise to a simultaneous increase of publications, and created the need for additional academic outlets, apart from the Dutch international journals already existing in the field.

The present issue of *Orientalisms* is the first International Yearbook of the Dutch Association for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies. Although the name happens to be the same as that of the memoirs of Sir Ronald Storrs (*Orientalisms*, London, 1939), former Oriental Secretary at the British Agency in Cairo and later Military Governor of Jerusalem (1917), the orientations of the editors of the Yearbook are wholly different, since they do not wish to be associated with colonial attitudes which are, or should be, a thing of the past.

The Dutch Association for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies has been active since 1976. It was officially founded in 1980 as an interdisciplinary society active for all those who either through their work, study or personal interest are dealing with the Islamic world, in particular the Middle East and North Africa. To promote the exchange of ideas and cooperation between those concerned, the Association has since 1976 been organizing yearly national seminars, the results of which have been published in a series of books in Dutch dealing with a wide variety of relevant themes. In addition to this series the Association has its own scholarly Dutch-language journal called *Sharqiyyât* (the translation of which reminds us of *Orientalisms*), publishing articles and book reviews. Next to this journal the need was felt for publishing an international yearbook, so as to provide a means through which not only Dutch colleagues could be reached, but also contacts could be established and strengthened with those abroad. The Dutch Association for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies has from its very beginning been active in its efforts to help to bridge the gap between cultures of

the Middle East and the West; an international publication may act as an intermediary in this respect.

During my years as a student and diplomat in the Arab world I have met with Dutch scholars in almost every Arab country, from Morocco to Iraq, and from Syria to Yemen, where they were active in a great variety of scholarly and other fields. At first I found it striking how some of them would work quite individually, not to say individualistically, without paying much attention to what others might be doing in the same or similar fields. This phenomenon, it should be stressed, was by no means a specifically Dutch one, and had much wider international proportions. Thus it might happen that different scholars would do serious research on the same Arabic manuscripts in the same libraries, covering almost identical subjects, and coming to similar results, sometimes with an interval of several years—and all this without being aware of one another. Occasionally this was due to lack of cooperation from the libraries concerned. Sometimes whole theses had to be rewritten in order to be original. Thus a lot of unnecessary work was done, leading to frustration that might have been avoided. More recently there has been a strong tendency to coordinate and exchange information, this being only a natural development, as it is, or should be, in the interest of all those involved. The Dutch Association for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies has substantially contributed to this development.

Another phenomenon which struck me over the years was that not a few Western scholars and students would approach the Middle East as if it were a kind of abstract laboratory in which minute and occasionally eccentric aspects of Arab and Islamic society could be studied in isolation, by way of a personal hobby. Sometimes the people under study would be discussed as in a debating club, as objects fit to cause amusement or, on other occasions, to give rise to passionate admiration or amazement. When attending such discussions among Western students and scholars, it would sometimes occur to me that those very people who were being discussed might easily have felt insulted in one way or another, had they been present, just as we ourselves might feel insulted or indignant if we had been the subject of similar patronizing discussions among foreigners. And on those occasions where people of the Middle East or North Africa did indeed attend such meetings, their questions, remarks and reactions would sometimes clearly reflect their displeasure, not to say indignation, at the way in which they themselves or their society and culture were being dealt with. This is not to say that such studies should be discontinued, but rather that discussions and direct contacts between the various parties concerned are needed more frequently, as these could increase mutual understanding and

help to bridge the gap apparently still existing between Western academics and people in the Islamic World.

The substantial increase during the last quarter-century in the number of Western students studying in the Arab and Islamic world itself has been a positive development. Whereas at first it was more the exception than the rule for students to study in the region itself, now the opposite tends to be the case, be it that some cultural centres in the Islamic world, such as Cairo and Rabat, for various reasons receive more attention than other important centres such as Baghdad or Damascus. Some scholars have argued that students from the Arab and Islamic world are much more familiar with our culture and society than Western students are with the world of Islam, as the number of people from Middle-Eastern countries living in the West is much greater than the number of Western people in the Middle East. This relative imbalance is only slightly being redressed by the gradually increasing number of Western students in the Islamic world.

The establishment of Western academic institutions in the Arab and Islamic world is another means through which mutual understanding could be enhanced. The Netherlands Institute for Archeology and Arabic Studies in Cairo is a striking example of an academic institution which has supported the trend towards increased mutual understanding and cooperation by developing from a purely Dutch institution into a pivotal academic meeting point not only for Dutch scholars, but also for a much wider international public, both Middle Eastern and Western. It has achieved this by organizing weekly lectures, which are followed by stimulating discussions, and provide numerous opportunities for further academic and personal contacts.

The title of the first annual of *Orientations, The Middle East & Europe: Encounters and Exchanges*, clearly reflects the above-mentioned aims of the Dutch Association for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, as do the titles of the various contributions. The editors of this new series should be congratulated on their initiative, just as its contributors and readers should seize the additional opportunity thus created to help to bridge the gap of understanding between the Middle East and the West.

Cairo, Summer 1992.