SESAMO Dossier

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**Surfing the Italian Editorial Outputs on the Middle East and North Africa: Still an Unbeaten Track?**

Geographical proximity does not necessarily lead to a better understanding of the ‘other’. A sense of strangeness may persist despite a lengthy residence in a foreign country, as in the case of Evelyn Baring, British controller-general in Egypt since 1879 and later consul-general (1883-1907) who, quoting Archibald Henry Sayce, considered the ‘Oriental mind’ “as strange to him as would be the mind of an inhabitant of Saturn”.¹ In a typical orientalist refrain the all-encompassing Islamic religion was evoked to explain the irreducible alienness that made the Orientals, and the Egyptians in the case in point, a ‘subject race’ destined to be dominated by ‘governing races’.²

In the heart of the Mediterranean, Italy is separated from neighbouring Middle Eastern and North African countries by a small stretch of sea but, at once, a considerable distance in terms of reciprocal knowledge. This is not surprising if one thinks of the range of books within reach of a general audience. Until recently, it was possible to come upon half-price books on display in a mid-sized bookshop including a series of titles on Muslim women’s segregation.³ This apparently minor detail could help explain the

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³ The following titles were showcased: Leila. *Murata viva*. Casale Monferrato, Piemme, 2006; Bellarbi, M. *La bambina con i sandali bianchi*. Casale Monferrato, Piemme, 2010; Joya, M. *Finché avrò voce. La mia lotta contro i signori della guerra e l’oppressione delle donne afghane.*
‘obsession’ of public opinion with issues such as the Muslim headscarf or women’s submission (to quote Michel Houellebecq’s famous novel of 2015). With equal probability one could find on the market essays on the threat of ḥīdāḥ or the intrinsic incompatibility of Islam with democracy, this becoming more and more present especially after the migratory waves from southern Mediterranean countries and the Islamists rise.4

The long-lasting deficient and biased understanding among the Italian general public is not a recent phenomenon given that scholars, already in the mid-1970s, wondered how to redress the situation. Their proposals, as listed in the final report of a 1974 congress, included, audaciously, the insertion of Arabic language courses in secondary and high schools’ curricula. The publishing industry was also called upon as the “natural mediator between scholars and the general public”: “people — it was said — should look for experts’ advice, while experts should respond to the needs of the public by addressing problems of general interest”.5 If education had remained essentially Western-oriented, publishing houses have manifested an increasing interest towards the Arab world to such an extent that since 2016 the Torino Book Fair hosts a stand on the topic (“Anime Arabe”, coordinated by Paola Caridi and Lucia Sorbera).6

Publishing industries, in collaboration with scholars, could play an important role in deconstructing neo-orientalist narratives, which reiterate the view of an unchangeable inegalitarian and undemocratic Muslim world. “There is life beyond jihad”, as Arab writers were appropriately hailed at the 2016 edition of the Torino Book Fair.7 Niche publishers have worked as ‘liaison publishing

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houses’ (*editoria di contatto*) by translating literary works. As for essays, editorial series oriented to a sort of *Que sais-je?* have been released, as well as more specialised outputs, including didactic series and textbooks. On current affairs on the MENA region, it is worth mentioning the launch in 2021 of the Italian version of the online magazine *Orient XXI*, along with the informative reports of the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) and the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

This issue of the SESAMO Dossier takes stock of some of the latest high popularisation and research publications on the Middle East and North Africa without pretention to be exhaustive. The choice fell on those publishers that enhanced lately their production on the MENA area and on studies dealing with countries in the headlines approached through a long-term perspective. The reviews here included are to be attributed to the following authors (in the listed order): Beatrice Ferlaino, Antonino Scalia, Antonio Messina, Giacomo Macola, Carlotta Marchi, Francesco Mazzucotelli.

This selection bears witness to the hoped-for “close and vibrant relationship” between scholars and publishers, recommended by late Alessandro Bausani. While being a step forward, this collaboration is not an unhindered task for scholars who are called to respond not only to the demand for

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9 Among the small and medium-sized publishers we could mention Jouvence, with the series “Memorie del Mediterraneo” and “Narratori Arabi Contemporanei”; E/O with the series in Arabic “Sharq/Gharb”, Ponte alle Grazie and La Nave di Teseo.

10 The editorial collection “Farsi un’idea” (Getting an idea), published by Il Mulino, consists of easy-to-read books organised in thematic units. The section “Capire l’islam” (Understanding Islam), inaugurated in 2001 with *Il Corano* by P. Branca, reached its apex in 2016 with four titles (https://www.farsiunidea.it/percorsi/capire-l-islam).

11 This is the case of Edizioni Lavoro with the series “Islam”, Carocci with the series Quality paperbacks, a collection of books about the history of some Middle Eastern countries or key issues for the region, and Mondadori Università. More recent initiatives have been undertaken by Tamu Edizioni, a vibrant editor from Naples associated with a library, and Mimesis Edizioni with the series “Mediterraneo, Nord Africa e Medio Oriente”.


14 Bono, S. “Bilancio e prospettive degli studi arabistici in Italia”, p. 84.
accessible information of the general reader and Italian-speaking students but also to the imperatives of the evaluation process. Italian scholars have to publish for worldwide publishers to reach a wider audience and receive a positive assessment on the international impact of their research outputs. The pressure to publish (‘publish or perish’, as the saying goes) is a pressure to publish in a widely spoken language such as English. Scholars throughout their career are not encouraged to publish textbooks that, even if an essential tool for students and cultivated readers, do not present by definition a high level of research originality. The challenge is to balance diverse needs, and not neglect the domestic editorial market for the sake of internationalisation.


*Il Marocco dalle conquiste arabe a Muhammad VI*, published by the Istituto per l’Oriente in 2021, is a concise book full of details and essential information about Morocco’s history. The author, Barbara De Poli, is a historian expert on the Arab world. In this short but very dense work, she shows all her refined knowledge about the history of Morocco, presenting how legacies of the past influence the country’s current political, social, cultural and economic configurations.

Indeed, as the author anticipates in the introduction,

> to understand contemporary reality, we need to trace the history from the first Arab invasions, define the evolution of the systems of power, and of political and social relations between different religious and linguistic communities. (p. 8)

In tracing this history and marking its milestones, the author guides the reader through more than 1,400 years of Moroccan history by including some important, accurate, and sometimes overlooked details. Highlighting them enables both experienced scholars of the country and those unfamiliar with Moroccan history to learn valuable information and build an in-depth understanding of the Moroccan reality.

The ability to combine elaborate information with a long-term path of historical changes is what, despite its relative brevity, gives us the impression to read a work in which the historical complexity is intertwined with a rare summarizing ability. The book retraces with clarity some of the main themes frequently used to describe the Moroccan society: the relationship between
the Arab and the Amazigh population in different historical phases, the functioning of the different economic systems and their connections with central power, the ties between religion and politics, the legitimization of monarchic and party power, the role of women and that of civil society in shaping social transformations.

While these interpretive lines have been for several years at the center of numerous debates on the complexity of state-building processes that have challenged concepts such as makhzen, tribe, co-optation, etc., the work presented by De Poli is nevertheless innovative. If not for the themes she develops, it is for the way it establishes a dialogue between these interpretative lines. She proposes for each one a definite thread that, though intertwined with the others, does not blur into them and builds coherence between these different components. Although this entails a less in-depth study of each topic in comparison to texts focused on only one issue, analysing different themes together provides a useful way to connect some of the fundamental aspects of contemporary Morocco.

In accordance with this historical lucidity, the author adopts some classical dualities through which the Moroccan context is conceived (i.e. modernity/tradition; corruption/honesty; public/private). However, by looking at them over the long term, the author implicitly problematizes them, showing their nuances and their historical construction and definition. Thanks to the clarity of the author in analysing the power dynamics in the imperial and pre-imperial periods, the book leads the reader to essentially understand the process of state-building. Indeed, it retraces the relations between European powers and the Moroccan empire in the period leading up to the colonial conquest, and it follows the history of colonial and post-colonial violence reporting on the bottom-up resistance movements in the different historical phases. Furthermore, the book does not overlook the relevance throughout history of international dynamics in shaping government, State, and national identity.

By looking at how the domination mechanisms have taken — and still take — shape in the Moroccan context, the book allows for an understanding of historical Moroccan complexity and offers a view of today’s events focused

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on the monarchy’s ability “not only to adapt itself but also to adapt the country’s development to its means of survival” (p. 162).


This book is a bold and successful attempt to fill a gap in the Italian language literature concerning the Middle East history and politics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by providing a comprehensive and concise overview of the current debates about the area. To my knowledge, this is the only Italian succinct work discussing several key themes including but not limited to seminal theories, state building, national, political and religious movements and ideas. By carefully combining theoretical discussions with empirical details, the authors fulfil their promise to realise an interdisciplinary monograph addressing both students and learned readers.

Despite covering a wide area, Di Peri and Mazzucotelli avoid the risks of writing an unfocused book by delimiting their topic and stating their thesis. The authors adopt two clear criteria to choose their topics within such a vast subject matter: they privilege the history of the most significant ideas depending on their impact on the intellectual debate and actual praxis (p. 2). In addition, they make explicit their core intellectual goal: adopting complexity and refusing any exceptionalist view of Middle East politics (pp. 5-6).

The book consists of three parts: ‘conceptual fields and thematical maps’, ‘actors and keywords’, and ‘maps of the Middle East’. The first part offers four chapters on some crucial issues for the study of the area. The first chapter discusses modernization theory and its impact both on scholarship and on actual policies by the US and the EU towards the Middle East countries. The second chapter illustrates the state-building processes in the Arab world by emphasizing the interplay between the conventional notion of sovereignty and supranational political currents such as pan-Arabism and Islamist factions such as Daesh. The third chapter focuses on the political impact of multiple rents (natural, touristic, geopolitical) in the Arab world and the effects of neoliberalism in the same area. The final chapter discusses confessionalism and national building processes from the Ottoman era until nowadays and deals with four empirical national cases (Turkey, Israel/Palestine, and the Kurdish people). The part of the book devoted to ‘actors and keywords’ presents 15 monographic mini-chapters mostly concerning political movements (i.e., Baathists) and political Islam (i.e., Salafism and Wahhabism). The final section of the book consists of eight commented political maps that present overall
processes (i.e., the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire) and political turning points (i.e., the Sykes-Picot Agreement).

One of the main strengths of the book is its interdisciplinarity which derives from the different backgrounds of the two authors since Di Peri is a political scientist whereas Mazzucotelli is a historian. The fruitful dialogue between the approaches is straightforward throughout the first part where the theoretical depth is combined with the diachronic analysis. Nonetheless, the book presents some flaws as well, of a structural nature. In particular, the chapter about ‘rent and patrimonialism’ is strikingly undersized (5 pages) if confronted with the others in the section. (15, 13, and 17 pages). Moreover, the theme is one of the less explored in Italian literature, therefore it looks like a missed opportunity. In addition, the mini-chapters are uneven: they include disparate material such as a small anthology of ideological portraits of Shiite thinkers (pp. 90-96) as well as brilliant mini-essays such as the one about martyrdom (pp. 127-131). Nevertheless, this criticism does not aim to diminish the merit of a book that achieves its goal to be able to guide the reader through an “autonomous reading path” (p. 2). Therefore, we hope it will be widely read and adopted as a textbook for postgraduate classes.


A history of the Middle East in late modern and contemporary times, capable of taking into account the elements of continuity and inclusiveness that have characterized the Arab-Muslim world in its relationship with other ethnic groups and religious denominations, free from those prejudices that for decades have confined it among the dark pages of a merely conflictual past. This is the significance of Lorenzo Kamel’s recent, dense and fluent volume, *Napoleone e Muhammad ʿAlī. Medio Oriente e Nord Africa in epoca tardo moderna e contemporanea*, published by Mondadori in 2022. Kamel’s work moves along the lines of a fruitful rereading of the main events that have characterized the history of the Middle East, restoring the complexity of phenomena that can be located within global historical processes. A history that is certainly troubled, but also rich in facets and nuances such as to rescue it from the trivialization typical of those orientalist readings produced between the two sides of the Atlantic.

The Arab conquest of the region, which began in the seventh century, was accompanied by natural processes of Arabization, to the point that “the
invaded merged with the invaders” (p. 4). For centuries, the Middle East witnessed the peaceful coexistence and/or tolerance, not always perfectly harmonious but certainly persistent, of different religious groups and identities, even of considerable magnitude when placed in relation to what was happening on the old continent. This leads the author to reflect on the history of the Middle East as a “sum of particularisms” (p. 14), capable of coexisting within the same area. A coexistence, however, destined to break down with the devices of homogenization of societies initiated in late modernity, when a process of ethno-confessionalization took place in the region for the first time in its history, within which “the image of a homogeneous Islamic world was ‘constructed’ and promoted” (p. 15).

The origin of the destabilization of the entire area is thus not to be found in the absence of natural states and borders, i.e. homogeneous ethno-confessional entities, but rather in the demise of those fluid and plural identities that have characterized the region’s history for centuries. The configuration and ‘balkanization’ of borders was largely contributed to by Western powers, whether through the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the establishment of the mandates system or through the principles of self-determination of peoples enunciated by US President Woodrow Wilson in the aftermath of World War I. The author points out how the Wilsonian principle was intrinsically racist and concealed the purpose of perpetuating colonial hegemony by paternalistically considering indigenous peoples as amorphous and incapable of making decisions, with the consequence that “the opinions of almost all the representatives of the peoples subjected to the mandate system were in no way taken into consideration” (p. 102). These peoples decided to found a parallel and antithetical organization to the League of Nations, namely the League Against Imperialism, which in its short decade of existence gave voice to millions of human beings subjected to colonialism and the mandate system.

While overall the volume gives the reader a historically accurate picture of more than two centuries of history, some of the stances appear sometimes sketchy and not entirely convincing. If in the League Against Imperialism the author sees the culmination of the emergence of transnational forms of solidarity of anti-imperialist inspiration, the subsequent forms of organization of the non-aligned countries that took off with the Afro-Asian Bandung (1955) and Belgrade (1961) conferences are dismissed as the beginning of a caesura phase destined to strengthen national sovereignties to the detriment of interstate relations. Even the expression ‘Third World’ is presented as intrinsically discriminatory, as it would postulate “an imaginary hierarchy between countries” and the belief “that the ‘white majority’ was by nature better off than the human beings found in contexts of Africa or Asia” (p. 163). In fact, one may well
speak of the ‘Third World’ as a multiplicity of countries that at some point in their history sought, as Manochehr Dorraj put it, a third path of development between and beyond capitalism and communism. The various Arab, African, and South American socialisms are prime examples of this. Even in their diversity and specificity, these ideological systems shared many more similarities with each other than they did with capitalist democracy and Marxist orthodoxy. Legitimate, therefore, to present the ‘Third World’ as a set of countries that sought a ‘third way’ between the two dominant ideologies, chronologically predating it.

In any case, Kamel's volume proves to be very important not only to ‘rediscover’ the history of the Middle East, but also to foreshadow some possible future scenarios within the region.


The thread holding together this wide-ranging and well-researched monograph is the influx of small arms into Afghanistan between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Not only is this a subject worthy of investigation in its own right, but it also works as a lens through which the author, a Professor of Asian History at the University of Milan, explores both internal Afghani politics and changing British approaches to the so-called ‘Great Game’.

Having already got off the ground at the time of the Durrani Empire, the transformation of south-eastern Afghanistan into a gun society received a new boost in the aftermath of the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-1880), when the British government of India sought to contrast Russia's territorial expansion into Central Asia by supporting the accession of Amir Abdur Rahman (1880-1901) and by supplying him with tens of thousands of muzzleloaders and breech-loaders. Some of these same weapons — as well as locally produced ones — would later be used against Anglo-Indian forces themselves during the large-scale uprisings which rocked the North-West Frontier in 1897-1898 and which exposed the ultimately ephemeral nature of Abdur Rahman’s centralising project and the compromises he had been forced to make with Pashtun local institutions and tribal militias.

Illegal imports from Muscat and other ports along the Arab coast of the Persian Gulf — an interesting topic to which Giunchi dedicates an entire chapter of her book — also accounted for the militarization of south-eastern
Afghanistan and the fact that, by the beginning of the twentieth century, “every Afghani youth” on either side of the Durand Line was reported to “own his own gun” (p. 163). A source of great concern for the Raj, which feared for the security of the North-Western Frontier Province, the activities of gun-runners across the Gulf and through Baluchistan went on unabated until the early 1910s, when the British naval blockade of the Makran coast and, especially, France’s commercial withdrawal from Oman finally began to bear fruit. Not the least important effect of the spread of firearms in south-eastern Afghanistan was to reinforce the ambivalence of British representations of ‘the Pashtun’, who came to be construed both as a shining example of martial virility and as a symbol of fanaticism and vengefulness. As Giunchi aptly reminds us in her conclusion, the rise of the Taliban movement and the Anglo-American ‘war on terror’ have recently given a new lease of life to this familiar imperial topos.

Since the author is not at all insensitive to cultural perspectives, it is surprising that the Pashtun’s own appraisals of firearms should hardly rate a mention in the book. Did guns play more than a purely military role in south-eastern Afghanistan? Were they ever endowed with expressive and symbolic (as opposed to merely functional) attributes? Readers are left none the wiser. A second problem with the book is that the deep knowledge of the specialist literature shown by Giunchi is not reflected in her maps, which are either sketchy or, in one case, unreadable (see p. 164) and do not permit the general reader to follow the dense narrative presented in the volume. These criticisms aside, Il Pashtun armato remains an original piece of research and a noteworthy contribution to Italian scholarship on Asian history.


Almost a year, as this is being written, after the US evacuation and the rebirth in Afghanistan of the Islamic Emirate in the hands of the Taliban, it appears that the events of August 15, 2021 have represented “a shift in power relations” and opened “new scenarios in a world that appears to us to be increasingly complex and unpredictable” (p. 13). In this context, the second edition of Afghanistan. Da una confederazione tribale alle crisi contemporanee by Elisa Giunchi (October 2021), full Professor in Asian History and Institutions at Università degli Studi di Milano, traces, through a meticulous historical reconstruction, the causes that led to the events of the summer of 2021. Giunchi shows how,
in a “time without history”,\textsuperscript{17} where awareness of the past seems to have given way to a process of “obfuscation”\textsuperscript{18} and forgetting, historical research become both urgent and necessary.

How is it possible to explain what happened in 2021? Giunchi opens with this question and follows up with a series of interdependent analyses, both local and international. The relationship between the different levels emerges in the first few pages and remains a constant until the end of the book, ultimately representing one of its strengths. It is clear that Afghanistan's fate has depended on a series of concauses, actors, spheres of interest and lack of awareness. After all, as the author points out, a thorough knowledge of Afghanistan's history and social structure (based on dynamics of “aggregation and decomposition”) (p. 144), as well as of the mechanisms of political legitimation and recognition, would perhaps have led to a different result and “prevented some errors of judgment” (p. 144).

The book is built on a rich bibliography and analysis of international websites, complemented by journalistic sources. Consisting of seven dense chapters, the author’s work rigorously traces the long history of Afghanistan, leading the reader to critically reflect on several factors, both endogenous and exogenous, that Giunchi believes are indispensable for an understanding of the contemporary period.

The book follows a chronological progression that starts, in the first chapter, with an analysis of Afghanistan's social structure and religious identity. It covers ethnic fragmentation, women's and family issues, religious traditions and the importance of customs. This is a pivotal chapter, serving as a key to subsequent ones and providing the reader with a clear and necessary interpretive framework. From the second chapter, the author deals with the country's institutional, political and international history, which arises from the intersection of economic, social, political and religious elements. These elements form the basis for its complexity: the transition from confederation to constitutional monarchy; the spread of Islamism and the influence of communism; the birth of the presidential republic; the internal uprisings; Afghanistan's position in the Cold War; the role of al-Qaeda and the Taliban; Washington's strategy and the interest of international powers; the issue of exporting democracy; and, finally, the fall of Kabul and the return of the Taliban.

\textsuperscript{17} Prosperi, A. \textit{Un tempo senza storia. La distruzione del passato}. Turin, Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2021.

\textsuperscript{18} Prosperi, \textit{Un tempo senza storia}, p. 5.
Afghanistan. Da una confederazione tribale alle crisi contemporanee is a necessary reading. By addressing the public and stimulating in-depth reflection, it raises awareness of the past events that are reflected in the present. The result is, on the one hand, a historical reconstruction and an acute assessment of the “weight of history” (p. 143), the role of the West and its crisis, and the position of emerging powers. On the other hand, it is the deconstruction of misconceptions, unfortunately widespread and established in public opinion, in favour of a complex and timely reinterpretation of Afghanistan’s history.


With two decades of experience in the field, Lorenzo Trombetta has a unique familiarity with both the dimension of everyday life and the grand schemes of international and domestic politics in the Middle East. This proficiency translates into a massive work that is almost reminiscent of Braudel in its sharp focus on the *longue durée* of political processes and the relevance of geographical spaces.

The author leads the reader into a voyage back and forth through three centuries of Syrian history, with a focus on the complex and unstable relations between central governments and peripheries. A prominent feature of the book is the rich pattern of evolving arrangements and the agency of multiple subjects involved in the fight for power. Conflicts are historicized and presented as multi-layered, in a clear departure from the analyses that portray Syrian politics and conflicts in terms of (supposedly) intrinsic ethnic or sectarian traits. A major feature in the volume is the idea that the conflict in Syria cannot, and should not, be read merely as a proxy war nor as a primordial clash among homogeneous communities.

*Negoziazione e potere in Medio Oriente* is a dense book, and as such it might prove challenging for first-timers in Syrian history and politics. It requires, and deserves, dedication and careful reading. An entire chapter is devoted to the political history of Syria from the late Ottoman period to our days, and yet the author problematizes the concept itself of periodization, especially when it comes to the troubles that have been wreaking havoc on the country since 2011. Any choice of a watershed moment appears as open to discussion and should not dilute the factors of continuity and persistence, as well as the changes that are detectable only on a longer time span.
The author explains the negotiation and the fight for power in contemporary Syria as an architecture with multiple levels, including the international, the regional (Middle Eastern), the national (Syrian), and the micro local dimension. A nuanced and meaningful analysis makes sense only when it looks at the interconnectivity among these levels, and how the actors at each level influence each other.

In fact, this is a book on politics and the political history of Syria as much as a thoughtful and thought-provoking meditation on methodology of research and positionality. The author actually questions his own positioning in relation to the social and political context of contemporary Syria, and how this has an impact on his research and analysis. This self-reflective attitude emerges as a refreshing break from the prevailing trends in the public discourse about the Middle East.

The book includes an appendix with three interviews. Rather than a fringe section, these interviews reinforce the main argument of the author and appear as an integral part of his discourse. The author steps back and gives voice to three individual stories. Such stories are not selected because they are exemplary in any sense, but because they give a strong sense of the complexity and contradictions of trajectories that can hardly be simplified and flattened through labels and empty signifiers.

These final interviews are arguably the most captivating section of the book, where the author is able to both assume a fair scholarly distance from the topic of his analysis and display a vibrant empathy for these human beings and their lives, deserving praise for the balance he is able to achieve.