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MOBILITY, SPATIAL THINKING, AND MENA'S GLOBAL INTERCONNECTIVITY: A PRIMARY SOURCE ROUNDTABLE

Most appropriately for a collection of essays on mobility and spatial thinking, this roundtable began as an in-person academic workshop: a familiar ritual of professional mobility in normal times, but one which, under the special circumstances of our meeting, felt more like an act of heroic resilience (or, perhaps, simple foolhardiness). In October of 2021, after well over a year of COVID-19-related travel restrictions imposed with unusual rigor by authorities in Italy, the two of us (Giancarlo Casale and Cyrus Schayegh) organized a modest one-day symposium at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence.[1] The event brought together nine PhD students and postdocs from our two institutions (the EUI and the Geneva Graduate Institute), all engaged in research in Middle Eastern history in a variety of periods and geographies, as well as three discussants, Malika Dekkiche (University of Antwerp), Ulrike Freitag (Freie Universität Berlin and Zentrum für Moderner Orient, Berlin), and Jan Hennings (Central European University).

Given the unusual circumstances of our workshop, the format we chose was also somewhat unusual. Instead of presenting formal papers, each participant was invited to share a translation of an unpublished primary source from their current research, and to comment on how this source might shed new light on historical linkages between the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), however defined, and other areas and worlds.[2] We settled on this format and focus for a double reason. On the one hand, we both had the strong impression that MENA history as currently practiced remains more resistant to the methodologies and perspectives of global and international history than other area studies fields (such as South Asian

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or Southeast Asian history). On the other hand, and arguably more importantly, global history has, for its part, proven resistant in the opposite direction. To be sure, global history is, in principle, a field created with the intention of pushing beyond Eurocentric understandings of history.[3] Nonetheless, in practice it has faced increasing criticism for relying too much on Anglophone bodies of secondary literature and on primary sources mainly in Western languages, particularly English, in ways that are frequently at odds with the methodologies of area studies. Thus, rather counterintuitively, the "global" perspective of global history has on the whole not resulted in the kind of deep engagement with non-Western sources and research practices that might disrupt the Eurocentric assumptions upon which traditional historiography has been constructed.[4]

For institutional reasons, the implications of this methodological challenge were felt particularly acutely by the two of us, both Middle East historians in graduate programs specifically focused on training in global and international history. As such, placing junior historians from our respective departments at the center of our workshop and asking them to unpack, contextualize, and discuss with their peers a single archival source seemed to provide an unusually rich opportunity not only to advance their own research, but at the same time to leverage their experience to explore new avenues for integrating MENA studies and global history.

A similar set of considerations lay behind our workshop's focus on space as it relates to questions of global history. Increasingly, global historians (and, to a lesser extent, international historians) have recognized the importance of space—asserted in general by the "spatial turn"[5]—in ways that are arguably more systematic and pervasive than among national historians. This can be seen, for instance, in the relatively sophisticated analyses of space as a multivalent referent that takes on multiple forms.[6] At the same time, it appeared to us that MENA constitutes a particularly fruitful platform in its own right to think through issues of space, for at least four discrete reasons.[7]

First, and most basically, MENA forms the geographical pivot of Afro-Eurasia (in other words, the "Old World"), meaning that myriad Euro-African, Afro-Asian, Asian-European, and Eurafrasian connectivities per force have had to pass through, depart from, or otherwise engage with the MENA. As a result, MENA offers an unusually rich spatial setting to think through, or rethink, historically contingent connections, and to propose new avenues of comparison.[8]

Second, as a region MENA itself is highly heterogeneous and self-evidently constructed, inviting complex thinking about the definitional role of "regions"—whether maritime or land-based, whether global or world or international or even subnational—as the basic building blocks of global history.

Third, due to its physical proximity to Europe, MENA provides an ideal vantage point for "inverting the gaze" and challenging some basic Eurocentric assumptions still implicit in global approaches to history—including Europe's own status as a stable, geographically defined space distinct from other world regions. This is because MENA and Europe are not only direct neighbors, but also two regions that existentially and spatially overlap. For example, the Mediterranean is not simply a boundary but a contested space that divides and connects simultaneously, while the Ottoman Empire was not only an Asian polity but deeply present in both North Africa and Europe.[9]

Fourth, while MENA has frequently been a central crossroad between world geographies, this centrality is itself contingent and dynamic (i.e., has changed dramatically over time). Several factors are at play here. One is new transport, communication, and engineering technologies like those facilitating the 1859–1869 construction of the Suez Canal. Others involve the changing patterns of global commerce, or the evolving realities of power politics. All these factors have continually modified how—and how unequally—space is used and experienced in MENA and beyond in ways highly relevant to global historians. And crucially, these uses and experiences also include *dis*connections, a topic that is becoming as central a concern to global historians as connections.[10]

It remains true, of course, that as a region MENA must be understood—like all "regions"—as "internally" heterogeneous and "externally" hierarchically networked. As such, it obviously is not the only region that can be of interest to global history, and overlaps with interregional constructs that global historians have a longer history of engaging with (such as "the Mediterranean").[11] For that matter, many landmark global histories—for example, Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton: A New History of Global Capitalism*—are conceptualized not transregionally but more "genuinely" globally.[12] Even in books such as his, however, regions—in all their rich intersecting subregional parts—*do* play a role. Think of nineteenth-century cotton-growing colony/colonizer Egypt and its complex web of relationship with the Sudan (including labor) and with the Ottoman center (including questions of suzerainty).[13] Hence, to do justice to the complexities of

even the most synthetically global topic, historians need to make space for the kind of perspectives that can only be revealed through work in non-Western languages. This is not to say that subregional or regional dynamics collectively and accumulatively super-determine global phenomena; wider systems effects *do* exist and *do* matter. But the latter are ultimately grounded, in however varied and different ways, in multiple regional realities—and to truly grasp those, historians need (to repeat) non-Western linguistical tools.

With all these considerations in mind, our nine junior researchers therefore converged in Florence with documents and translations in hand. Five of the resulting contributions turned out to be a particularly good fit for *Mashriq & Mahjar*; they are assembled here. Collectively, they cover an enormous chronological, geographic, and thematic range: the interrogation of a humble cross-border courier in the eighteenth-century Balkans (Uskoković), an intelligence report on the movement of Armenian revolutionaries from the Ottoman high commissioner in late nineteenth-century Egypt (Akıncı), a proposal from Comintern to establish a center of operations in Thessaloniki in the early 1920s (Sayım), a preliminary plan for the botanical gardens of Hebrew University (Bieling), and a private letter from a female Jewish agriculturalist in wartime Palestine, written to her husband in the British army in North Africa (Motzafi-Haller). And yet, despite this diversity, these documents evince fascinating parallels, brought to light by the accompanying commentaries. To outline the most salient of these is the objective of the remainder of this introductory note.

Most basically, many of these contributions show the extent to which borderlands (in MENA but certainly also elsewhere) are central to how a region is perceived and "works," even as borderlands themselves come in widely different forms.[14] In Uskoković's case, fascinatingly, the Ottoman lands in the southern Balkan are at once politically and economically central to the empire—the reason the Venetian state desires to know in detail what is going on there—*and* a crucial borderland between that empire and other states, including the Venetian one (a coastal and maritime power quite unlike the Ottoman state). In Akıncı's case, Eastern Anatolia appears as a borderland that is politically neuralgic to the Ottoman central administration, while Egypt post-1882—British yet still legally Ottoman—appears as a sort of new borderland between two empires that are not even technically contiguous. And in Bieling's case, Zionist botanists in the interwar Yishuv in a sense created a new mental map of the Middle East in which

they are the (new) center and other places are, while not a borderland, certainly an imagined periphery of scientific knowledge creation.

Another point, meanwhile, concerns transport and communication infrastructures. Several texts show these not simply as connectors between places but as spaces of their own—and contested spaces at that. This is most explicit in Uskoković's text. On the one hand, the road from Istanbul to Kotor is a corridor of constant and dynamic movement (obviously, as this is a road's purpose!). But on the other hand, the road itself and the rest and recovery houses along it are quite stationary and fixed—*very* much so, given that long bits of that road follow (that is, in a sense *are*) Roman-era *viae*, including the *via militaris*. Another, similar example is Sayım's early interwar communist sailors. These men work on ships that, often on the move along maritime routes all around the Mediterranean, become quite special spaces of political action—something that both the Comintern and European intelligence agents recognize, and seek to instrumentalize.

Third, a note on what one may call mobility "sequences." In Motzafi-Haller's case, Britain's extensive expansion of transport and postal systems in World War II MENA was one factor, among others, underlying the greater social and economic mobility of *Yishuvi* workers and their simultaneous ability to remain in regular touch with their families. In Bieling's case, the work of German botanist and Zionist-to-be Otto Warburg was undertaken at first for the pre-World War I German Empire and then for Palestine's postwar integration—as a Mandate, *nota bene*—into the sprawling British Empire: these two realities and their scientific networks formed a background to the Zionist botanist's mobility in MENA beyond Palestine, as he made botanic collection tours. A last example would involve Sayım's text. He shows how the post-World War I arrival, in Thessaloniki, of 10,000 Armenian refugees from Anatolia was one reason why Comintern officials imagined (and, it seems, used) that city as a place from which communism could be spread to the Middle East. The reason was that during and just following the genocide, Armenian refugees had also (indeed mainly) arrived in the *mashriq*. Put differently, Armenians' forced mobility out of Anatolia to different points created a sequential mobility between those points—a mobility that could be used for other purposes, like communist action.

Continuing this theme, all the contributions illustrate, in different ways, the enduring religious-ethnic heterogeneity in MENA—thereby confirming a main emphasis of scholarship over the past several decades. More surprising, however, is the extent to which they

repeatedly highlight the close connection between physical mobility and social mobility, as well as mobility's role in enabling agency even among subaltern members of the social order. In Uskoković's case, for instance, a humble peasant is transformed by his role as a courier into both a representative and an informant of the Venetian state, rubbing elbows with local notables during his journey and, ultimately, having his experiences of travel recorded as part of Venice's official archival record. Similarly, in Sayım's text, sailors and dockworkers—precisely because of their transnational mobility—become the natural agents of the Comintern's attempts to expand influence across the Mediterranean. And, perhaps most counterintuitively, in Motzafi-Haller's case the experiences—and agency—of a sedentary female agriculturalist are preserved for posterity as a direct result of her husband's absence during his military service in WWII.

Such cases are important in light of a growing number of recent critiques of global history and, particularly, its relative focus on mobility and cosmopolitanism—elements thought to privilege the lived experience of global elites, both past and present at the expense of others.[15] But the documents presented here suggest that, at least for eighteenth-century peasants, interwar sea laborers, and a woman farmer of WWII Palestine, their lived realities—as well as our ability as historians to access them—were intensely dependent on the experience of mobility.

With these thoughts in mind, let us conclude with the reflection that, as all of us meekly emerge from what seemed an interminable night of self-imposed immobility, the documents presented below remind us that the past two years are, historically speaking, a blink of an eye. As such, they reopen the long experiential vistas of mobility and spatiality that, from the perspective of the non-Western archive, have barely begun to be explored, and whose treasures we are now eagerly ready to unlock.

NOTES

[1] The workshop was generously funded by a *EUI-IHEID Collaborative Research Grant* from the European University Institute Research Council.

[2] We of course understand that MENA is a modern term; we use it here in reference also to the early modern period for simplicity's sake.

[3] Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 3–6.

[4] See, for example, Alessandro Stanziani, "Global History, Area Studies, and the Idea of Europe," *Cromohs: The Cyber Review of Modern Historiography*, published 3 February 2021, doi: 10.13128/cromohs-12562; Gabriela de Lima Greco and Sven Schuster, "Decolonizing Global History? A Latin American Perspective," *Journal of World History* 31, no. 2 (2020): 425–46. For the dominance of the British Empire in imperial history, see Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé, "Transimperial History – Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition," *Journal of Modern European History* 16, no. 4 (2018): 430.

[5] For the classic example, see Edward Soja, "The Socio-Spatial Dialectic," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70, no. 2 (1980): 207–25. For an overview, see Jörg Döring and Trustan Thielman, eds., *Spatial Turn: Das Raumparadigma in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2008); Barney Warf and Santa Arias, *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2009).

[6] Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann, "Global History and the Spatial Turn: From the Impact of Area Studies to the Study of Critical Junctures of Globalization," *Journal of Global History* 5, no. 1 (March 2010): 149–70.

[7] See also Nile Green, "Rethinking the 'Middle East' after the Oceanic Turn," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34, no. 3 (2014): 556–64; "Roundtable Mediating Geography and Space," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 2 (2017): 315–39; Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), using the Middle East to unpack the concept of transpatialization.

[8] For an introduction to this question, see Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[9] On the Janus-faced nature of the Mediterranean, see Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2000).

[10] On "disconnections" in another non-European context, see Indrani Chatterjee, "Connected History and the Dream of Decolonial History," *South Asia: Journal of South Asia Studies* 41, no. 1 (2018): 69–86. For an early modern example, Zoltan Biedermann, *(Dis)Connected Empires: Imperial Portugal, Sri Lankan Diplomacy, and the Making of a Habsburg Conquest in Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[11] On a related note, regions understood more or less as units (not our approach!) have been more central tools to *world*, not global, historians: Conrad, *History*, 38.

[12] Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A New History of Global Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2014).

[13] Eve M. Troutt Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain and the Mastery of the Sudan* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003); Aimee

Genell, *Empire by Law: The Ottoman Origins of the Mandates System in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming), which deals importantly with late Ottoman Egypt. See also Judith Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 16–62.

[14] Classic texts are Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel, "Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands," *Journal of World History* 8, no. 2 (1997): 211–42; Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999): 814–41. For the Middle East, see now also Jordi Tejel and Oeztan Ramazan Hakki, eds., *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918–1946* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

[15] See, for example, Jeremy Alderman, "What is Global History Now?," *Aeon*, 2 March 2017, https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment.