Cosmopolitanism in the Middle East as part of global history

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Abstract

This essay[1] on »Cosmopolitanism in the Middle East as part of global history« combines certain historical insights, stemming from research into the history of Middle Eastern port cities in the 19th and 20th centuries, with some more general concerns regarding international academic cooperation. These are based on my experiences as director of a research center which tries to encourage international cooperation. This paper discusses the issue, firstly, from the point of view of the formulation of research agendas, secondly by having a closer look at the concept and, finally, with regard to certain lessons which impact on any international cooperation.

Why discuss cosmopolitanism in the Middle East?

Why should one consider the theme of cosmopolitanism? In the West, the concept is usually employed with strong positive connotations. It has recently had a rather amazing renaissance in public discourses, almost always in the context of contributions concerned with globalisation. This stands in stark contrast to the lack of even an adequate translation into Arabic (*kusmubulitaniyya* is usually used). While world citizenship (*al-wataniyya al-ʿalamiyya*) is a closely related concept, for which such a translation exists, writings on this topic in Arabic are almost as rare as those on »kusmubu-

litaniyya«. Thus, in the Western context, we have a positively connoted concept, cosmopolitanism, which is seen as one way of dealing with another concept, globalisation. While there is a lot of criticism of globalisation as such, when combined with cosmopolitanism, it is almost always seen positively.

In the Middle East, by contrast, only globalisation, *ʿawlama*, seems to be discussed widely, although often with a negative connotation. A random example is the article on »The globalisation of values and concepts, ʿAwlamat al-qiyam wa-l-mafāhīm« by a Lebanese professor of sociology and writer by the name of Talal ʿAtrīsī.[2] In the article, published on *Jazeeranet*, he warns of the dangers which globalisation presents to the preservation of Arab and Muslim values by possible new international regimes, similar to those that already control politics and the economy. While the Western notion of »cosmopolitanism«, as it is mostly used nowadays, thus evokes a positive connotation of openness, participation and engagement with other cultures, ʿAtrīsī's article is a strong word of caution against globalisation: It points to the positive features of his own – in this case Arab-Muslim – culture which he sees threatened by globalising trends. And, one may add, he is not that far off the mark: International conventions and treaties have tended to create pressures for certain practices to change. An example is the Convention on the Elimination about all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Its

2 http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/C1272B70-005B-47FC-A71D-5E6B7B3D4CCC.htm#L1 (accessed 8.5.2009).

demands remain highly debated in, for example, Middle Eastern countries because parts of it are seen by conservative forces as contradicting certain norms and traditions.

Confronting these two positions which do not even address exactly the same issue highlights, in spite of the certain unevenness, two sides of the same coin: If one looks at how the notion of cosmopolitanism, or of cosmopolitans, was discussed in Europe – and more specifically in Germany – about one hundred years ago, one would find quite similar fears to the ones expressed by the Arab author above, and probably at least partly for the same reasons. Cosmopolitans were considered as the quintessentially »vaterlandslose Gesellen«, people not caring for their nation. They were seen as potential 5th columns of all sorts of suspicious international trends – internationalism, Marxism, Judaism and the like. The change from a negative to a positive image of cosmopolitanism can be linked to a variety of factors, but mostly to the fact that Germany (at least until very recently) not only thrived on exports but also aspired once again to an increased international role in alliance with other European countries and the US. In contrast, the political situation in the Middle East is much more marked by feelings that globalisation might actually not be such a good thing after all. This feeling has become particularly pronounced during the years of the Bush administration and US unilateralism. However, a sense of being acted upon, rather than being able to determine one's own fate, has been in place for a much longer time (albeit with very pronounced regional differences). In contrast, nationalism, or a combination of nationalism and political Islam, has often been perceived to hold the promise of a more »authentic« development. I don't want to judge either of these positions but simply draw attention to the obvious fact that different positions in time and/or space and political system tend to foster different preoccupations and attitudes.

This is relevant in more than one way: The evocation of one and the same concept can evoke very different reactions – and thus rather unintentionally foster tensions even in situations where cooperation is the main aim. Furthermore, academic agendas in the humanities and social sciences tend to be influenced by the overall contexts in which the relevant scientists move. Taking the example of my own discipline, history, one can thus observe that global, transnational and transregional history, has become all the rage among a younger generation of scholars in Germany. It is also very popular in many European countries, the US and it has found – perhaps not surprisingly, a fair share of followers in India, China and Japan. In contrast, it seems far less attractive to people working in (not necessarily on) the Middle East, Africa and Latin America.

The new Western interest in cosmopolitanism, with regard to the Middle East, but also as a more general phenomenon, is partly also connected to this general interest – and this is why I took the detour. Thus, there is quite a lot of both theoretical/philosophical work on the concept, and quite a number of studies evoke cosmopolitanism when discussing Middle Eastern port cities. As mentioned before, "cosmopolitanism" is not discussed very often by Arab historians. »Cosmopolitan« does, however, appear as a frequent label for marketing to a mostly Western audience: It is employed notably in the area of tourism (cosmopolitan Istanbul, Dubai etc.) and world heritage (where Mardin in its application for world heritage status, for example was trying to evoke an Armenian – Kurdish – Arab – Turkish conviviality long since gone, and long denied).

On the level of the formulation of **research agendas**, then, and possible themes for cooperative projects with colleagues from areas where globalisation, and by implication cosmopolitan, has a less favourable connotation, the question arises: Should one abandon such a topic or concept and choose another one, which is perhaps less value-laden? Obviously, this might become necessary. I would like to suggest that it is worthwhile to pursue the issue in spite of political gut reactions. Certainly, from a Western perspective, the study of cosmopolitanism stands much to gain by including Middle Eastern perspectives, rather than merely evoking them.

The concept of cosmpolitanism

This can be demonstrated by asking how cosmopolitanism is generally used, and what lessons Middle Eastern history can contribute. Therefore a closer view at the concept is necessary. This is relevant, as public parlance often refers to Mediterranean cities like Istanbul, Marseilles, Beirut, Venice or Alexandria as quintessential embodiments of a past cosmopolitanism. This can be found both in historical works, such as Robert Ilbert's seminal study of Alexandria, as well as in more documentary works – an example would be Mohamed Awad and Sahar Hamoudi's »Voices from Cosmopolitan Alexandria« and those referring to literary studies evoking a cosmopolitan mood, such as Michael Haag's »Alexandria, City of Memory«.[3]

A common lense in such studies is the focus on elite experiences of cosmopolitanism, often by European expatriates or travellers. They could feel at ease in the clubs of their compatriots and, at the same time, take in such doses of foreign culture as suited them. While some were satisfied by

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3 Robert Ilbert, *Alexandrie 1830-1930*, Caire, 1996; Mohamed Awad and Sahar Hamoudi (ed.), *Voices from Cosmopolitan Alexandria*, Alexandria, 2006; Michael Haag, *Alexandria, City of Memory*, New Haven, London, 2004

roaming picturesque Oriental bazars, others went for the full experience of cultural pantomime by disguising as Easterners and Muslims. In his stinging critique »Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle East Studies«4, Will Hanley has pointed out that not only is this Middle Eastern cosmopolitanism usually considered in a grieving mode, but it is also intrinsically linked to the existence of specific institutions, such as the tavern, closely associated with Italian and, more importantly, Greek communities. Furthermore, he argues convincingly that the elites flavouring cosmopolitanism did actually need the popular diversity to fulfil their need for the exotic.

Even if we limit ourselves to elites, one needs to distinguish, for the 19th and early 20th centuries, between members of the colonial elites, and others. The former, possessing the necessary educational background as well as political and, if necessary, military backing, could fairly easily afford to exercise the type of idealistic cosmopolitan tolerance demanded by modern theoreticians such as Ulrich Beck:

Cosmopolitan tolerance [...] is neither defensive nor passive, but instead active: it means opening oneself up to the world of the Other, perceiving difference as an enrichment, regarding and treating the Other as fundamentally equal. Expressed theoretically: either-or logic is replaced by **both-and logic**.5

Even if they would have aspired to it in spite of the inherent need to recognise unequal relations, members of elites living under colonial rule would have found it much harder to exercise the same kind of »active tolerance«. And if they decided that they opposed the prevailing power-relations, different colonial powers at different times went to great lengths to prevent or control the movement of anticolonial elites. Pan-Islamic intellectuals and activists, such as the famous Jamal al-Din al-Afghani or Sayyid Fadl b. Uthman b. Yahya from the Mapilla coast, were thus subject to extraditions, travel restrictions and close supervision. However, such measures could extend far beyond a few prominent personalities, notably in times of political crises or during anticolonial uprisings. It is not difficult to think of different-but-similar experiences in our present world, testifying to the longevity of international power differentials: Regularly, colleagues from different parts of the world are barred from participating in academic training, seminars and similar activities due to the difficulties or impossibility of obtaining the required

travel documents and/or visa. Even elite mobility is not just a matter of social and economic status, but of the respective position of individuals or groups in an unequal international system. This type of perspective has led critics of the concept, such as Peter van der Veer, to define cosmopolitanism as a component of colonial modernity.6

We could thus abandon the concept, and it might actually be that it has not been very attractive in the Middle East for exactly the reasons highlighted by its Western critics. However, one could also widen the concept to include the aforementioned tavern keepers and users, as well as Indian and British sailors, Sudanese porters and Balkan prostitutes, to mention a few. While the bourgeois cosmopolitans might have appreciated the folkloristic colour of these groups, local well-to-do residents and notably local governments were less amused by what they considered to merely be rabble. Pass laws and travel permits were introduced by the Ottoman government to control the actions and movement of such people. European consulates, faced with migrants from European countries looking for jobs, or merely living on the benefits provided by expatriate communities, tried via their consulates to control vagrants and have them extradited. In the cosmopolitan city I am currently most concerned with, namely Jeddah, one such »problem group« were destitute pilgrims stranded after the annual hajj. The British, most concerned about the large presence of poor Indians, as well as the Dutch, dealing with pilgrims from Southeast Asia, introduced elaborate mechanisms to regulate and control their movements. They wanted to make absolutely sure that only those who could pay for their own fares arrived in the Hijaz, lest the consuls were held responsible by the Ottoman government to deport potential beggars and destitute people.7

Following Asef Bayat, one might call this phenomenon »everyday cosmopolitanism«8 or »cosmopolitanism from below«. This refers to the experiences of those not belonging to the small cosmopolitan elites linked to such powers which permit and safeguard travel to foreign countries, but to the large majority of those for whom mobility has been, and, one might add, of need. Not only do their experiences of mobility differ considerably from those of elite cosmopolitans, but – more often than not – also their experiences of legal and social status, and their approach to their surround-

4 Will Hanley, Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle East Studies, History Compass vol. 6 (5), 2008, 1346-1367.
5 http://www.signandsight.com/features/1603.html, accessed 7.5.2009.

6 Peter van der Veer, "Colonial Cosmpolitanism", in: Steven Vertovec, Robin Cohen (eds.), *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism, Theory, Context, and Practice*, Oxford 2003, 165-179.
7 India Office Library, L/P&S/7/30, No. 15 *Circular to Local Governments and Administrations*, 24.8.1881, encl. No. 3, Zohrab, Her Majesty's Consul at Jeddah to His Excellency the Viceroy and Governor-General of India, 17.2.1881.
8 Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics. How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Stanford 2010, 185.

ings. While I wouldn't argue that elite cosmopolitanism was free of experiences of conflict or social boundaries, it was certainly less characterised by such experiences than that of people whose aim was, first and foremost, survival, rather than experiencing the world.

Why can such a perspective be enlightening? Cosmopolitanism would suddenly need to consider questions of class and social status, and it would need to address the question of the governance of mobility and diversity, as well as the protection of the rights of individuals beyond the nation state. Obviously, this is not a very original observation – philosophers of cosmopolitanism have thought of this before. The German philosopher Kant, one of those most quoted among historical thinkers of cosmopolitanism, postulated a »right to visit«, while Beck, Stichweh and others hope for the realisation of a World Society with requisite rights. Yet others, such as the Turkish-American philosopher Seyla Benhabib, who has a much more pressing concern for the »cosmopolitans from below«, hope to realise such rights within the existing nation states.[19]

Be that as it may: Consistent reminders by historians, whose objects of study such as the Mediterranean port cities serve as the model for many of the present debates, could help to push such a debate further. They could not only remind the idealists among the philosophers of their elitist bias but possibly contribute to the question of governance through their analysis of various past models.

There is another issue at stake here, beyond that of class and status, and that concerns the question of how cosmopolitanism can be conceived geographically. It seems that the current model of globalisation is still very much founded on the notion of a process emanating from one center – be it through the global spread of capitalism and industrialisation as in Wallerstein's World System Theory, be it through »modernisation« spread by the imperial powers as in modernisation theory, etc. Even much of postmodernist theory upholds this perspective, albeit with critical undertones. Of course, it has been acknowledged that there might have been earlier such centers, but this has not impacted significantly on the basic notion of globalising processes emanating from one center (and its peripheries).

The study of cosmopolitanism in port cities can, however, serve to at least modify this image. To stay in what is commonly conceived as the Middle East: If we discuss the aforementioned cities of Beirut, Istanbul or Alexandria, cosmopolitanism will mostly (although by no means exclusively) encompass Middle Easterners and Europeans, however one defines such categories. Take, for instance, Manama or Aden and the picture changes quite considerably. Iranians, Indians, East Africans populated these cities besides Arabs of varying origins and, of course, the British. While the latter were rather prominent in Aden and Manama, Jeddah as port of the two most holy cities of Muslims was more distinctly Muslim, with Europeans constituting only a rather marginal minority. The orientation towards the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and, in all three cases, the Indian Ocean, was a major feature of these three cities until the 1960s (and, to some extent, it still is). This concerns both groups of cosmopolitans mentioned earlier.

Indonesians were in touch with the Ottoman government via Jeddah, and thus not only tried to rally support for their causes but also raised awareness of the extent of European expansion. Indian nationalists stopped in Aden en route to Europe where they lobbied for their demands, and gave lectures about their experiences. In the 1950s, Adenis not only went to study in Britain, Cairo or Baghdad, but often chose Khartoum for further training. Jiddawis tended to look towards India as a place for training as well as careers. Even if the educational institutions of choice were by that time usually designed after those in Britain, the overall environment and peer groups distinguished the experience of studying there quite considerably from that found in Britain or elsewhere. I think that this question of how we conceive of globalisation, and the recognition of its multi-centredness, is very important. This highlights another point, that of **possible lessons for academic cooperation.**

The importance of truly global networks of research and learning

Global networks of research and learning encompass not only the contact between Europe (or rather: Germany) and Middle Eastern countries, but also that between scholars from different non-Western countries. While this point might seem self-evident, it actually has a number of consequences for the formulation of our research agendas and the concepts we employ, as shall be outlined in the following:

- It seems to me that, at the moment, much of what is considered in Western academic circles as relevant, is exclusively defined as such by Western scholars. This is reflected both in contents, as I tried to illustrate when discussing cosmopolitanism, and in form: Publications in Arab, African or Latin American journals don't command the same respect as such in American or European ones. However, as I've also tried to show, attention to other perspectives might actually be crucial not only to the setting of research agendas, but also to the actual shaping of concepts.

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9 Seyla Benhabib et. al., Another Cosmopolitanism, Oxford 2006.

- These considerations cannot possibly be divorced from the question of the language we employ. At the moment, English seems to have become the central lingua franca, why else would I, as a native speaker of German, talk in English to an audience of mostly Arabs (whose language I speak) and Germans? As much as global networks need linguae francae, as much I feel that much is lost in using them: This is no nostalgia for linguistic pluralism, but rather results from many experiences in contexts where people try to express themselves in foreign languages and remain far below the intellectual finesse they would have when using their native tongue. Thus, while recognising the need for English, I strongly advocate an increase in translation – and in a type of translation that takes into account the need for cultural as well as literal translation. This would include, for example, the necessity to point to the respective connotations of terms such as globalisation in English and Arabic at a certain period.

- The question of dominant language(s) is closely linked to larger questions of hegemony. However, in order to strengthen multi-polarity, we actually should try to actively encourage academic production in a multitude of languages, and value it accordingly – by which I do not mean to suggest ignoring the production in other languages.

- All of this is, of course, based on the premise that it is better to engage with each other, and listen to each other, rather than to have completely separate networks running side by side, often not knowing of each other. This is not – as our own practice has it all too often – just an appeal to my Arab colleagues to publish more in Western journals, it is – perhaps much more so – an appeal to myself and my colleagues to do more of the reverse as well.

If the internationalisation of academic cooperation is not to remain a gathering of scholars from the few economically and politically powerful countries but turn into a truly global exchange, it is necessary to discuss these issues much more prominently that is commonly the case. An engagement with other world-views and cultures, to return to the idealistic definition of cosmopolitanism, requires conditions which enable freedom of movement and expression for all. Only thus can truly global networks emerge, networks whose nodal points are not exclusively centered on "the West" and "the North" but include Cairo, Lagos, Calcutta, Buenos Aires and Istanbul and which bring together perspectives developed in different linguistic and academic contexts.