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In *The Middle East from Empire to Sealed Identities* Lorenzo Kamel proposes an analysis on the 'long nineteenth century,' in which the formerly fluent 'largely flexible, multifaceted and 'hyphenated'' character of Ottoman concepts of population became increasingly solid, and ultimately 'sealed.' This metaphor seeks to depict how in the course of time 'nonmutable culturally genetic profile' was ascribed 'to a group' (p. 5). In the light of contemporary representations of Near Eastern conflicts as inherently sectarian, he enquires into important historical junctures of Ottoman reforms and intensified intervention by European polities. Thereby Kamel uncovers the ways and means by which new (European) notions of population and its plurality proliferated and were implemented on the local populations in Syria, Palestine and Lebanon.

Kamel starts his argument by critically engaging with terms such as 'tribe,' 'religion' and 'minority.' Although these terms are frequently referred to in describing political conflicts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Kamel argues that today's fixed and seemingly 'medieval' notions of tribe, religion, or minority are rather young, historically contingent concepts of world-making. In his critical discussion he argues that neither of the fixed and essentialized notions these terms bring to bear was part of emic Ottoman discourse before the first decades of the nineteenth century (pp. 24–28). The Ottoman population before the nineteenth century, as a corollary, was organized along different socio-economic and religious cleavages, in which ideas such as minorities/majorities did not exist (yet) (p. 28).

In further elaborating on the process in which collective religious and ethno-national identities gained increasing political importance, Kamel engages with various significant points in time he calls 'moments,' each marking a 'watershed' in thinking about and acting upon the plural population of the late Ottoman Empire. Egyptian rule over greater Syria and the concomitant establishment of local municipal councils mark such a critical moment, for the new councils, organized along religious lines, cut across the 'traditional vertical non-sectarian subject-ruler paradigm' (p. 47) embodied in what Kamel calls, referring to Francioch, the '*muqata'ji*-system' [sic].

The following chapters each delve with detail into other 'moments,' which, taken as a whole, contributed in one way or another to an increasing emphasis on religious and ethno-national differences as a main factor in organizing the population and its administration. Among such important junctures are, according to Kamel, the emerging idea of an Ottoman citizenship during the Tanzimat reforms (especially from 1856 onwards), the British involvement in Arab national struggle, or the Balfour declaration. The colonial mindset of the post-World War I political order and the associated influence of the League of Nations, granting France and Britain mandate status, further contributed to essentialized perceptions of religious and ethnic cleav-

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ages among the local population in Palestine, Syria and Iraq. While generally stressing foreign influence, such as missionary activities and semi-colonial penetration to the region that put 'imported solutions' (p. 71) into play, Kamel presents a strong argument against the notion that today's borders in the region were artificial constructs of European powers, dividing the Near East among them according to economic interest. Rather, he emphasizes that, for example, Iraq was already in pre-modern times a more or less coherent geographical entity, the borders of which were similar to contemporary ones (p. 190). Such an argument makes an important point for raising awareness of the close entanglement of 'foreign' and 'local' ('outside-in' and 'inside-out') dynamics that more often than not augment each other instead of 'inventing' something totally new (pp. 72, 76).

The *Middle East from Empire to Sealed Identities* succeeds in pointing to a number of critical historical junctures that profoundly changed the face of Near Eastern demographics and political organization. It is exiting reading to follow the successive development from an empire with 'a level of coexistence […] higher than any registered in most parts of the world, Europe included' (p. 3) to a crumbling polity in which sectarian and ethno-nationalist notions of order increasingly gained political importance. Kamel's expertise allows him to delve into specific historical contexts and carve out how epistemologies of difference and interrelated political practices shaped nineteenth-and twentieth century transformations and their respective impacts on the present. Explicitly speaking to the present, the book offers an important avenue for students and experts to historicize and thereby critically rethink contemporary conflicts in the Near East as well as widely used and rarely questioned terms, such as 'religious minorities' or 'tribes.' The dense and concise presentation of the evidence further contributes, as can be hoped, to a wide dissemination of this work.

The downside of such a concise and focused work is that the reader at certain points would have wished for a more detailed discussion of historical complexity. While the 'moments' Kamel identifies are undoubtedly important for the argument, the micro-processes that these engender oftentimes remain little explored. For example, the institutionalization of the double *qaimaqamlık* in 1842 is presented as an act by European powers to separate one Christian and one Druze sphere of influence in Mt. Lebanon, thereby attempting to coherently order 'religious entities' (p. 57) which formerly overlapped. In fact, this institutionalization was a more complex process of negotiation between the Ottoman government and the European powers. It also underpinned more than intersectarian competition, as the Christian *Qaimaqam* was not accepted by the local Maronites either. Similarly, because Kamel does not go into the necessary details in concisely discussing the concept of *wataniyyah* (patriotism), introduced by the intellectual Rifāʿa al-Tahṭawī, it remains unclear when, how and to what extent such a concept proliferated and ultimately gained political importance or translated into political culture and political practice (p. 76).

Likewise, it is little explored how a 'new millet system' (p. 102) was different from former regimes of dealing with non-Muslim populations of the empire. Kamel describes and analyzes the ways by which the British authorities implemented their 'spacial-confessional understanding of local context' (p. 104), referring to the example

of the sectarian compartmentalization of Jerusalem, but the reader learns little about the prior status during the 'Empire' part of the book's title. What did the old millet system look like, if such a thing ever existed? In this regard, Kamel fails to engage with the relevant literature by Benjamin Braude and Michael Ursinus: The argument between those two authors as to what extend the Ottoman Empire was following a specific, more or less coherent policy on its non-Muslim population would have been important for grasping the transformations of the nineteenth century. Also, in this context, the idea of 'porous' imperial identities (p. 47) that predate the rise of the 'sealed' ones remains little explored. What does 'porous' indicate here? And is it analytically valuable at all to speak of 'identities' for pre-industrial contexts of empire? Such aspects, as well as the explicit aim to speak to the present, make Kamel's concise and very focused work somehow appear as a linear narrative, leaving little space for historical discrepancies, ambiguities, failed negotiations, or unsuccessful aims.

Yet, the mentioned reservations do not harm the author's overall aim to investigate the ways in which collective identities were shaped and transformed over time to an extent that they are today perceived as timeless, nonmutable and ahistorical entities. Kamel's critical perspective on such issues is indeed necessary and sets a good example for anyone engaging with earlier, imperial, or post-imperial Ottoman population and its plurality.