Reconfiguring the Past: Politics of Memory in the Middle East and North Africa since the 1990s

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This workshop applied concepts of collective memory, historical cultures and cultures or politics of remembrance to the Middle Eastern and North African context. Nine case studies presented in the workshop focussed on a number of relevant developments in countries like Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Israel/Palestine, Egypt and Morocco. In recent years, historical research has increasingly focused on the ways in which historical memory is canonized, contested and transformed over time. As far as the Middle East and North Africa are concerned, such phenomena, in spite of their obvious importance for politics, still remain largely understudied. The few existing case studies in the field clearly suggest that even in the framework of the predominantly authoritarian regimes of the contemporary Middle East and North Africa, memory and history can be fruitfully analysed as sites of contestation and processes of bargaining between various political actors.

Since their inception, the postcolonial nation-states in the Middle East made use of more or less clearly conceived cultural devices to advance the project of nation-building. In most cases, sponsoring a certain kind of nationalized historiography and iconography and the introduction of a national curriculum in schools was an integral part of these strategies. During the first decades following World War II, efforts to impose more or less official representations of the nation were strongly influenced by the respective political choices of state elites. In this respect, a major divide can be observed between, on the one hand, the Arab nationalist and socialist revolutionary regimes and, on the other hand, the more conservative monarchies. Due to international, regional as well as domestic pressures, starting from the 1970s, most of the region's regimes experienced a phase of social as well as ideological 'disengagement' of the state. This, eventually, led to a remarkable strengthening of civil societal activities and socio-cultural pluralism in many countries of the region despite the continuing authoritarianism of the regime.

The workshop aimed to scrutinize, in a comparative perspective, the role played by the so-called soft areas of history and memory for processes of negotiating political change beyond the level of regime change. It mainly focused on the period since the 1990s when the existing regimes came under growing national as well as international pressure. How did politics of memory pursued by Middle Eastern states change? How do official narratives and politics of history react to the emergence of competing versions of the past? In how far are they responsive to socio-cultural change and related politics of memory 'from below'? In how far is the cultural, ethnic and religious diversity of each society taken into account and what political meaning is attached to it? How are external or internal 'others' represented? To what degree is the often painful political history of inter-communal domestic strife being accounted for in official as well as oppositional historical narratives of the respective countries? Can reform efforts in the areas of historiography and politics of memory be considered to be more than just decorative measures designed to re-stabilize the existing authoritarian order?

The program was opened by JAMA'A BAIDA who reflected on the work of the Moroccan Truth Commission (2004-2005) that was initiated by the Morrocan King Mohammad VI as a means to bring about reconciliation between Moroccan society and the state regarding the repressive politics of the king's predecessor and father, Hassan II, during the 1970s and 1980s. As a historian who took an active part in preparing and conducting the Truth Commission, Baida's presentation offered valuable insights regarding the potential and the limitations of initiating such a controlled process of communication regarding the

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country's conflictual past.

ANDREA FISCHER-TAHIR approached the ways in which Jews and Jewish history are incorporated into Kurdish nationalist discourse in Post-Saddam Iraq. Jews are addressed as lost neighbours who once lived among Iraqi Kurds in what is presented as peaceful coexistence. Kurds often identify with Jews as historical victims, regarding the Shoa in relation to the Anfal campaign perpetrated in 1987/88 against Kurds by the Ba'th regime of Saddam Husayn. Finally, Iraqi Kurds tend to look upon Israel as what they perceive is a successful example of state and nation building by a formerly oppressed minority. SOPHIE WAGENHOFER portrayed recent debates in internet blogs concerning the treatment of Jews in Morocco during World War II, following the publication of a controversial book on this issue by a US American historian that set out a debate in Morocco whether Mohammad V was also a „righteous among the nations" who saved Jews from persecution by the Nazis and their Vichy allies.

SAMIRA ALAYAN-BECK scrutinized the perception of Israeli civil holidays (Soldiers Remembrance Day, Shoa Remembrance Day, Independence Day) among the one million strong Palestinian minority living inside the state of Israel as formally equal but de facto marginalized second class citizens. Her illuminating study was based on field research carried out among Palestinian pupils in Israeli schools. KATHARINA LANGE juxtaposed her findings from field research among tribal communities with official historiography on tribes in Syria, pointing to a gradual diversification of Syrian public discourse concerning tribalism and tribal history.

ACHIM ROHDE presented evidence from the Iraqi press pointing to a rarely acknowledged public discourse on issues like democratisation and the rule of law in Iraq of the late 1980s and 1990s, suggesting that the politicisation of memory concerning Ba'thist Iraq has hitherto prevented a thorough look on developments inside Iraq during the past era. CORRY GUTTSTADT interpreted the pluralisation of Turkish public discourse regarding the country's minorities, particularly Armenians, as an encouraging sign for the future development of the country. While jingoistic Turkish ethnic nationalism was actually on the rise, she concluded, „the developments of the last 15 years are not just a beginning: the silence is broken; the taboo is finally cracking".

ATEF BOTROS addressed similar developments in contemporary Arab literature, particularly concerning relationships between Jews and Arabs, both in history and today. Finally, CATHARINA DUFFT addressed the issue of multiculturalism, its erasure and reappropriation in Turkey since the 1980s, based on the writings of Orhan Pamuk. The program was wrapped up in a closing discussion led by NORMAN SAADI NIKRO.

This workshop, for the first time, brought together ongoing research on politics and cultures of remembrance in the Middle East mostly by younger scholars coming from different regional as well as disciplinary backgrounds (History, Islamic Studies, Turkish Studies, Literature, Political Science, Ethnography and Religious Studies) who are working in Germany. At the same time, internationally known experts on the subject whose contributions framed the programme (key note lecture and closing comment) took part in the workshop. It aimed to promote comparative and interdisciplinary debates within a relatively new field of study and at the same time to create a research network in view of further cooperation. The workshop was convened by Bettina Dennerlein (Asien Afrika Institut, Universität Hamburg) and Achim Rohde (Georg Eckert Institut für Internationale Schulbuchforschung, Braunschweig). It was conducted in English.

Conference Overview:

- Jamaa Baida (Université Mohammed V, Rabat), Morocco's Truth Commission (2004-2005) from a Historian's Point of View: New Perspectives in Writing Contemporary History

Section I: Memory and Identity – Pluralizing the Past

- Andrea Fischer-Tahir (Zentrum Moderner Orient / SFB 640 Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), Neighbors, Allies and our Enemy's Enemy: Jews in Iraqi-Kurdish Images of the Past and the Present

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- Sophie Wagenhofer (Zentrum Moderner Orient / SFB 640 Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), Rethinking Jewish History in North Africa: Mohammed V and the Moroccan Jews under the Vichy Regime
Discussant: Sonja Hegasy (Zentrum Moderner Orient)

Section 2: Political Conflict and Competing Interpretations of the Past

- Samira Alayan-Beck (Georg Eckert Institut, Braunschweig/Hebrew University, Jerusalem), Cultures of Remembrance in Conflict: Perceptions of Israeli Civil Holidays among Palestinian Israeli Students
- Katharina Lange (Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin), The lake submerged our memories: (re)constructions of tribal history in Syria
Discussant: Schirin Fathi (Universität Hamburg)

Section 3: Inclusion and Exclusion in the Politics of Remembrance

- Achim Rohde (Georg-Eckert Institut, Braunschweig), Forgotten Voices: Debating Democracy in Ba'thist Iraq
- Corry Guttstadt (Universität Hamburg), „My Armenian Grandmother": Discourses on Minorities in Turkish Science and Literature
Discussant: Bettina Dennerlein (Universität Hamburg)

Section 4: Narrating the Past – Literary Perspectives

- Atef Botros (Universität Marburg), Intellectuals have only the Past – Tendencies of Remembrance in the Contemporary Arab Literature and Criticism
- Catharina Dufft (Universität Hamburg): The Theme of Multiculturalism in Post-1980 Turkish Literature
Discussant: Karin Hörner (Universität Hamburg)

Closing Discussion
- Norman Saadi Nikro (Notre Dame University Louaize, Lebanon), Final Comment

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