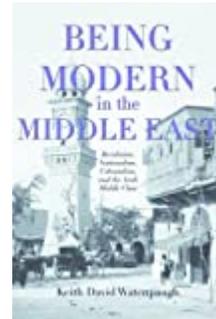




**Keith David Watenpaugh.** *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. xi + 325 pp. \$37.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-12169-7.



**Reviewed by** Eyal Zisser (Department of Middle Eastern and African History, Tel Aviv University)

**Published on** H-Levant (January, 2008)

## **The Rise and Fall of the Arab Middle Class in the Middle East: Between Modernization, Nationalism, and Revolution**

One of the great modern landmarks of the city of Aleppo is the Baron Hotel. The Mazloumians, a wealthy Armenian family of hoteliers, established this fixture on the city's main street at the beginning of the twentieth century. The story of the hotel from the time of its founding is, to a large extent, the story of the city of Aleppo in the twentieth century, as many of the period's most significant events occurred in or were otherwise connected to the hotel and its guests. It can, in fact, be viewed as a silent witness to Syria's transition from Ottoman rule to the French Mandate to Syrian independence and, finally, to the long rule of Hafiz al-Asad. Among the dignitaries who stayed at the Baron Hotel were Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), who housed his staff in the hotel during the Ottoman Army's retreat from Syria, and Gen. Edmund Allenby, who took rooms in the hotel immediately after the British Army entered Aleppo in October 1918. Both Faysal I (during his brief reign as king of Syria) and T. E. Lawrence "of Arabia" resided in the Baron Hotel. Many other famous figures were its guests as well. Some years later, the presidents of Syria adopted the custom of staying at the hotel whenever they visited the north of the

country. Al-Asad followed this custom during his first official visit to Aleppo as president of Syria.

Thus, it is quite appropriate that Keith David Watenpaugh's *Being Modern in the Middle East* mentions the Baron Hotel in connection with several major junctures in the modernization of Aleppo and the emergence of that city's middle class, topics that stand at the book's thematic center. For example, Watenpaugh relates the story of a meeting between Gertrude Lowthian Bell and the Christian banker Nicola Homsy in 1905, shortly after the hotel's opening. According to Bell's own testimony, the Greek Catholic archbishop of Aleppo also joined the meeting. When Bell asked the two men what lay in store for their country, the archbishop replied, "I do not know. I have thought deeply on the subject and I can see no future for Syria, whichever way I turn." [1] Watenpaugh also relates the story of Lutfi Fikri Bey, a deputy in the Ottoman parliament of Dersim and a supporter of those forces (the liberal entente) opposing the Young Turks' Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). During the parliamentary election campaign of 1912, Bey came

to Aleppo, where he was greeted by a stormy demonstration organized by local CUP supporters. As a result, he took refuge in none other than the Baron Hotel.

In 1988, Patrick Seale published his *Asad of Syria*, a political biography of the Syrian ruler with whom Seale had close personal ties. However, Seale's narrative recounts more than the life of Asad, as it also tells the story of the Syrian state from its beginnings to the mid-1980s. Seale mentions the Baron Hotel as well, placing it squarely in the context of Aleppo's transformation in the twentieth century: "Once a great trading city at the crossroads of caravan routes, larger and richer than Damascus, Aleppo had been in relative decline since the First World War when it was severed from its sea outlet at Alexandretta and from its hinterland in present-day Iraq and Turkey.... It suffered from poor sewerage, poor municipal services, and its main street where the historic Baron's Hotel stands became a shabby ghost of the elegant thoroughfare it had once been." [2]

Indeed, the accounts of Seale and others depict two Aleppos: one is a dynamic metropolis facing the future and inviting progress, the other a sleepy town finding it difficult to recapture its past glory. Arguably, Aleppo's declining state throughout the twentieth century is matched by a comparable decline in the status and condition of Syria's middle class during the same period. Watenpaugh's study focuses on this social group, which he depicts as the most energetic and leading force in early twentieth-century Syrian society, however battered and weakened it would subsequently become. Nevertheless, the issues of modernization and Westernization continue to represent a major challenge to Syrian state and society today as they did nearly a century ago.

These issues, which are critical to understanding the history of the Middle East in general and Syria in particular, are central to Watenpaugh's book. First, there are the questions of modernity and the modernization of Aleppo's population. Second, of course, there is the relationship between modernity and Westernization, and between these phenomena and the adoption of Western values and outlooks. Third, in the shadow of these issues, there is the question of the emergence of the middle class in Arab society, or more specifically, in Syrian society during the first half of the twentieth century. Finally, there is the question of the extent to which the middle class was in fact the backbone of Syrian society in this era.

Watenpaugh's major contention in this regard is summarized in the following statement: "in the crucible

of the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, World War I, and the imposition of colonial rule, a discrete middle class emerged in the cities of the Eastern Mediterranean that was defined not just by the wealth, professions, possessions, or levels of education of its members, but also by the way they asserted their modernity. To claim modernity, they incorporated into their daily lives and politics a collection of manners, mores, and tastes, and corpus of ideas about the individual, gender, rationality, and authority actively derived from what they believed to be the cultural, social and ideological praxis of the contemporary metropolitan Western middle classes" (p. 8).

Watenpaugh has chosen to make his case against the background of Aleppo's experience during the years 1908-46, that is, from the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 until Syrian independence. During this transitional period, the region experienced a number of major changes: the destruction of the Ottoman Empire, the imposition of European mandates, and the emergence of independent states. Naturally, these transformations were accompanied by ideological shifts from "Ottomanism" to "Syrianism" and "Arabism," from liberalism to radicalism, and the persistent role of Islam, albeit in various forms.

Watenpaugh's study vividly describes the aforementioned phenomena. Despite the fact that each chapter stands alone as an independent research topic, all are woven together into a single, though multifaceted, story. Another of the book's virtues is its placement of fundamental, yet comprehensive, theoretical propositions at the core of its discussion. In addition, Watenpaugh supplies the human face of historical events and processes, using a variety of sources to vividly illustrate the story of the social stratum and the city that serve as his book's focus.

Arguably, Watenpaugh could have expanded his theoretical discussion of the definition of modernity. Perhaps his analysis of the character and essence of the region's middle classes during the first half of the twentieth century could have benefited from even greater expansion. After all, previous scholars have dealt at length with many aspects of the question of the appearance of the middle class (effendia) in various regions of the Middle East. For example, it would be instructive to compare the case of Aleppo with those of Cairo or Alexandria, since events in Egypt have so often inspired developments elsewhere in the region.

Nevertheless, Watenpaugh's book makes important scholarly contributions to an understanding of a number of issues. First, he presents the story of the Syrian ur-

ban middle class. It should be remembered that Syria's history during the first half of the twentieth century has been written and told mostly through the eyes of the notable families constituting the urban elite. Syria's post-World War II history has been written and told mostly through the eyes of those social forces, mainly members of the 'Alawi community and the Sunni rural population, that came from the periphery to the center, eventually taking control of the state. Thus, Watenpaugh's study brings to the fore Syria's urban middle class, whose voice and presence have so far been missing from that country's historical narrative. Second, Watenpaugh reconstructs important debates within Syrian society about liberal and Western values, as well as identifies some of the main protagonists in these debates. This is an important service, for much of the scholarship to date has focused on the words and deeds of the proponents of various forms of Syrian, Arab, and pan-Arab nationalism, chief among them the founders and leaders of the Ba'th Party and Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP, also known as the PPS). Perhaps, it was natural for scholars to concentrate on the views espoused by these (subsequently dominant) political forces, and be inclined to see the course of Syrian history as almost inevitably leading to the seizure of power by advocates of these more radical visions of Syria's future. Thus, Watenpaugh's book makes an important contribution to our understanding of Syrian history by giving appropriate expression to these—until now largely ignored—voices advocating liberalism and Westernization.

Reading *Being Modern in the Middle East* prompts questions about other social groups in the vicinity of Aleppo during the period under discussion, like members of several minority communities and the Sunni rural population of the outlying region. These populations and social forces are absent from almost all studies of Syrian history prior to the mid-1950s, even though they were destined to occupy the center of Syrian politics in subsequent decades. It would be quite instructive, of course, to seek evidence in the earlier period that this significant historical development was in the offing. Some movement in this direction can be found in Michael Provence's *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (2005). Provence mentions the social origins of Michel 'Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, who were destined to found the Ba'th Party. These two figures were sons of grain merchants who had strong connections with the Hawran province. Awareness of the economic connection between the Hawran and the Maydan quarter of the city of Damascus might cast light on the path by which

the 1920s revolt spread along the Hawran-Maydan route from the Druze Mountain to Damascus, and it might also help to explain and clarify the connection of the Atrash family, or at least several of its sons, to the Ba'th Party. All this raises the issue of the links and relationships between the Syrian center and periphery, which were always much deeper and more complex than previously thought. Thus, the Syrian center should not be viewed only from the angle of the notable families that dominated it, nor should the center and the periphery be conceptualized as mutually exclusive spheres.

Watenpaugh discusses the events of the stormy 1930s in another interesting chapter, "Middle-Class Fascism and the Transformation of Civil Violence." The issues discussed therein merit particular mention precisely because they have received so little scholarly attention in the past. Watenpaugh quite appropriately revisits old questions, investigating the degree to which Fascism and Nazism found adherents in Syrian society, as well as exploring the political and social significance of the turn to violence and radicalism. Syrian intellectual life during this period requires fresh, more thorough historical investigation. Watenpaugh's study represents a first important step in that direction.

I began this review by noting that the second half of the twentieth century was marked by the decline of Aleppo, and indeed the whole northern region of Syria. In addition, previously significant social and political groupings were marginalized or even disappeared from view. The interesting question is: What does today's Aleppo with its millions of residents have in common with the small-town (one hundred thousand residents) Aleppo of the early twentieth century that is the focus of Watenpaugh's *Being Modern in the Middle East*? In this regard, we must note again the large-scale migration to Syria's cities and its political center that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century. Against this background, we can better understand Syria's more recent historical development, in other words, the collapse of the old social order, appearance of military regimes, and establishment of the Asad dynasty that survives to this day. The new groups moving to the cities brought with them the message of the Ba'th. However, large numbers of the Sunnis living in the slums of Aleppo adopted the views of radical Islam. Indeed, Aleppo became a focus of Islamist rebellion, against which the regime took repressive measures in 1976-82. However, those Islamist sentiments still survive, hidden beneath the surface.

We were given a reminder of the surviving vigor

and importance of the question of liberal thought in Syria, as well as the rise and fall of the Syrian middle class during Bashar al-Asad's first years in power. At that time, the young ruler lent his support to the so-called Damascus spring, a very brief period of political openness during which cultural and political forums and salons were allowed to operate. One such forum, which arose in Aleppo, was named after 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, whose earlier participation in several of Aleppo's well-known salons is mentioned in Watenpaugh's book. The Syrian authorities quickly shut down the later "al-Kawakibi" salon, which was led by 'Abd al-Rahman's relative Salam al-Kawakibi. Ultimately, Salam was forced to leave Syria and become a political refugee, just like his famous relative, who was pursued by the Ottoman authorities of his day.

Watenpaugh's book makes an important addition to our knowledge of Aleppo's history, joining Abraham Marcus's study *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity: Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century* (1988), in illuminating several issues critical to Middle East history. In effect, Watenpaugh's fascinating book can be viewed as a kind

of introduction to the trajectory of Middle East during the past century, oscillating between extremes, from Western liberalism to extreme nationalism to Islamic radicalism, as well as alternating between conservative and progressive impulses. Watenpaugh examines these matters in a specifically Syrian context, but it has value beyond the parochial. It also relates the story of the rise and fall of a middle class whose presence could have heralded the emergence of civil society.

In sum, *Being Modern in the Middle East* is an important, interesting, and instructive contribution to the history of ideas, while also being social and cultural history at its best. It is the laudable result of years of research. Overall, it reflects the author's empathy with his subject, a quality that definitely contributes to the depth of his insights and conclusions.

#### Notes

[1]. Gertrude Lowthian Bell, *The Desert and the Sown* (London: W. Heinemann, 1907), 267.

[2]. Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988), 450.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-levant>

**Citation:** Eyal Zisser. Review of Watenpaugh, Keith David, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class*. H-Levant, H-Net Reviews. January, 2008.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14067>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).