



DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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The Zvi Yavetz School of Historical Studies,  
Tel Aviv University

Dear members of Search Committee,

I am writing to apply for the post-doctoral fellowship at the Zvi Yavetz School of Historical Studies, Tel Aviv University. I am a historian of the modern Middle East and Islamic societies, focusing on cultural and intellectual histories of the post-colonial Arab world. Currently, I am a lecturer at the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

Last Summer I defended my dissertation *The Return of the Turath*. My work explores the long process through which the preoccupation with past traditions took hold of the Arab public imagination during the last three decades of the twentieth century. The anxiety with past traditions is a newfound anxiety that emerged within the condition of decolonization, rather than a permanent character of Arab thought. A close look at Arab writings and publications convey a rather complex picture. Until the beginning of the 1970s, the intellectual consensus among Arab writers was to focus on Western thought. This cultural trend was reflected in the massive translations of Western works, the appropriation of Western theories, and the creation of a vast Western corpus in the Arabic language. Scores of Arab writers, cultural critics, and nationalists in Arab societies thought of their cultural past (*Turath*) as a collection of dead traditions. This consensus about the *Turath* as static, moribund tradition, from which all intellectuals had to struggle to free themselves began to crumble at the beginning of 1970s. The new interest and angst with past traditions led to an epistemological break in the norms of Arab thought. Grappling with this paradigm shift lays at the center of my research.

My book plan will further investigate these shifts in Arab intellectual output while focusing on the question of the past in contemporary Arab intellectual debates. It asks why was there a marked return toward the study of the past in the wake of the 1960s in the Arabic-speaking world? Why was there a renewed interest in the past after decades of obliviousness and cultural indifference? Was it simply a “return to Islam” as some historians propose, or was it a broader cultural phenomenon best described as a return to the past? Arab intellectuals provided a term that captured that recent fascination with past tradition: *Turath*. Broadly translated as a cultural heritage or cultural repertoire, the term was coined in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century but gained popularity only in the 1970s. The question of how the past lingers on in the present and how Arab intellectuals cope with their *past* frames my work. Exploring the increasing pull of the past in the post-colonial Arab world poses serious questions with regard to the rise of political Islam and offers new insights on the nature of the politics of decolonization in the Global South in general. This work challenges existing periodizations of modern Middle East history, contributes to rethinking the geographies and the transregional flows that shaped territorial spaces within the

Middle East over time, and engages creatively with underrepresented subjects and themes, like North African scholars. As a post-doctoral fellow, I wish to pursue this inquiry line and bring my conclusion into a book manuscript form.

I have three articles coming up this year. My first article “The Force of Arab Authenticity Awakened: The Rise of a Framework in the 1960s,” is currently under review in the leading German journal *Die Welt des Islams*. In this paper, I explore the ways in which a variety of publishing houses and translation movements gradually integrated, and normalized, the notion of Arab Authenticity (*Asalah*) into their political vocabulary starting in late 1960s. A second article, “From Translation to Critique: The Roots of the New Arab Left in Lebanon” was accepted to the *Modern Intellectual History*. This article establishes the prevailing revolutionary mood in Arab thought in the 1960s and examines the cultural assumptions the newly translated texts of Marxist writings generated in Arabic. A third, yet shorter, article entitled “What Does it Mean to Be an Arab Left Today,” is due for publication on April, 2019 in *The International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*.

I thank you for your consideration. I look forward to participating in the The Zvi Yavetz School of Historical Studies’ rich intellectual exchanges. My C.V. is included in this submission. My letters of recommendations will arrive separately. Please feel free to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

Ahmad Agbaria