

*Essay*

# COLONIAL NARRATIVES: FROM ORIENTALISM TO WESTERN INTERVENTIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

What persistent constructs continue to define Arabs in contemporary global discourse? A swift scan of news headlines from around the world illustrates that associations with the Arab World, across social, cultural, political, and economic spheres, are still rooted in inaccurate, but enduring, colonial narratives about the region. Where these obsolete portrayals stem from, and whether or not they can effectively be combatted, bears examination. Perhaps most importantly, what implications do these outdated portrayals still have on the representation of Arabs in the current international scene?

Superficial observations, often utilized in Western media's depictions of the Arab World, may lead audiences to believe that these narratives arise from the region's supposed political volatility, a trope as common and overused as the East-West dichotomy. However, a critical examination of Orientalist theory, which originated as an academic discipline in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, reveals more substantive reasons regarding the continued presence of these narratives. This essay aims to chronologically dissect the origins of colonial narratives in and about the region, while tracing these discursive practices throughout both the colonial and the postcolonial periods. Upon establishing their origins, the essay also analyzes their present significance, and examines what the process of decolonization can look like going forward. Lastly, it seeks to em-

phasize that policymaking and narrative production are both concurrent and contingent.

## THE COLONIAL PERIOD

The pertinence of Orientalism in the rapid development of constructs about the Arab World cannot be understated. Examined as a precursor to European expansion, the term was popularized and defined by Edward Said in his canonical book *Orientalism*. According to Said, the term is defined as “the basic distinction between East and West, as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ and destiny.”<sup>1</sup> Orientalism emerged at an age of European fascination with the territory that stretched between northwest Africa and the Asian continent, termed “the Orient,” and eventually transformed into a compulsive capitalist pursuit.<sup>2</sup>

Before it became a justification for imperial advancement, the study of Orientalism existed as a European pastime. As travel from Europe to the Ottoman Empire and to farther East became more popular, countries like France and England were flooded with constructed imagery and stories from the Orient, written by travelers who had ventured to the region.<sup>3</sup> Men in traditional garbs and veiled women were common archetypes that captivated the European imagination. A particular incident is highlighted by Timothy Mitchell

in his book, *Colonizing Egypt*, where he quotes a description of an exhibit that was put on display by the French at the Eighth International Congress of Orientalists in 1889:

*“[An] Egyptian exhibit had been built by the French to represent a winding street of Cairo, made of houses with overhanging upper stories and a mosque like that of Qaitbay. So carefully was this done that ‘even the paint on the buildings was made dirty.’ The Egyptian exhibit had also been made carefully chaotic. The way was crowded with shops and stalls, where Frenchmen dressed as Orientals sold perfumes, pastries, and tarbushes.”*<sup>4</sup>

This example demonstrates the dramatic intrigue with the region that overtook Europe at the time, a curiosity that puzzled contemporary scholars, as it can neither be accurately described as admiration nor as disdain. The study of Orientalism as an “idyllic” European endeavor would prove to be temporary as political dynamics began to shift between the European continent and the region. The beginnings of Orientalist thought and study in a “despotic manner” in Europe coincided with changing internal structures that ironically had little to do with “the Orient” itself.<sup>5</sup> Post-Reformation Europe had altered its governmental systems to be more centralized, and thus, more powerful. European leaders were eager to expand their autonomy, and believed that government systems that did not mirror their

own, including that of the Ottoman Empire, lacked both legitimacy and validity.<sup>6</sup> Characterized as “the great bogeyman of Christian Europe,” the Ottoman Empire was made to act as a foil to the valiant Christian heroes of Europe at the time.<sup>7</sup> This change in characterization was not a dramatic one, as it was built upon the familiar idea of “the Orient” being the antithesis to Europe. At the time, violent and fanatical portrayals of Arabs, Turks, and Muslims in the European public sphere also emerged, echoing the political tensions mounting between Europe and its neighbors to the southeast.<sup>8</sup>

A period of unprecedented industrial and economic development in Europe, which coincided with the Ottoman Empire's economic and political decline, established an ideal landscape for land expansion into the “Orient.” For Europe, this idea went beyond advancing their political influence. As rapid industrialization led to the emergence of European capitalism, new markets were needed.<sup>9</sup> Thus, popular narratives were encouraging of European expansion into Ottoman territory and beyond, justified by the argument that its residents were incapable of governing themselves.<sup>10</sup> French Orientalists at the time argued that a rapid conquest was necessary to reintroduce civilization where “anarchy and barbaric customs” had reigned since the collapse of the Roman Empire.<sup>11</sup> There were many other anthropological and Orientalist works by European writers that contributed to this “genre,” such as Evelyn Baring’s writing



on Egypt,<sup>12</sup> and Pierre Loti's<sup>13</sup> and Edouard Lapene's<sup>14</sup> on the Maghreb. These earlier publications played a crucial role in swaying public opinion in favor of the necessity of European expansion into the region.

Such publications hold significance not just for the role they played in disparaging the cultural and religious norms of "the Orient," but because of where they placed the West in relation to the East. This period of rapid industrialization, in essence, witnessed "a reconceptualization of European legitimacy and identity."<sup>15</sup> Readings of Greek and Roman literature, popularized during the Reformation movement's efforts to establish bureaucracy and political power in Europe, propagated the dichotomy between Greek freedom and Asian tyranny.<sup>16</sup> This dichotomy was then positioned in parallel to the relationship between Europe and the Arab World. French political theorist Montesquieu even coined the term "Oriental despotism" in order to encapsulate the ways in which "the Orient" was incompatible with stability and order.<sup>17</sup> Thus, publications by these authors, as well as leading European educational institutions that focused on the study of Orientalism, incorporated these themes in how they situated Europe when investigating the region.<sup>18</sup>

## POSTCOLONIAL NARRATIVES

Entering the postcolonial period, these narratives altered slightly in accordance

with changing political dynamics, but portrayals of Arabs were still severely impacted by the colonial past, constructs, and legacy. Though countries across the Arab World declared independence from European colonization between the late 1940s and the early 1970s, colonial influences did not simply disintegrate after independence. Countries such as Britain, France, and Italy officially relinquished their jurisdiction in North Africa and the Maghreb with a wave of declarations through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the effect of their rule was, and still is, palpable in a variety of ways beyond the evident cultural and linguistic impact. In the case of France, for instance, unilateral treaties were established between the country and its former colonies in the region as a primary condition for the latter to be granted their freedom.<sup>19</sup> These treaties were often extremely one-sided, favoring France heavily and creating a major trade deficit in the economies of its former colonies for decades to come. As a result, not only were many countries in the Arab World exploited for financial revenue and natural resources during the colonial period, but in the post-independence era as well. In turn, such treaties and arrangements enabled Western media to label countries such as Algeria, Lebanon, Morocco, among others, as economically fraught and lacking the ability to manage their financial situation.<sup>20</sup> This kind of language is indicative of contemporary portrayals which depict the Arab World as a region that still needs

to be “saved” by the West.

While these narratives originated from niche Orientalist literature in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, their reach has extended into mainstream news and media outlets in the contemporary world.<sup>21</sup> Jack Shaheen, in his book and documentary *Reel Bad Arabs*, for instance, touches upon the intricacies of such portrayals of Arabs in modern Western media. He examines the roles that Arabs have played in movies and television that tie them to political occurrences of the time, and advances the notion that Arabs “inherited [their] image primarily from Europeans in the early days” of Orientalist thought.<sup>22</sup> Shaheen’s objective with his work is to illustrate the relationship between media production and the West’s changing policies towards the Arab World, and to acknowledge the ongoing cycle of “policy enforc[ing] mythical images, and mythical images help[ing] enforce policy.”<sup>23</sup>

These ideas have also impacted contemporary Western foreign policy in the region. More recent studies of the United States’ intervention in Iraq in the early 2000s have labeled it as a self-serving endeavor, fraught with neoimperialist motives, despite its disguise as a call for promoting freedom.<sup>24</sup> The operation began with allegations surrounding “weapons of mass destruction,” cited by the George W. Bush administration at the time, which later proved to be inaccurate.<sup>25</sup> What Iraq witnessed afterwards was an increase in sectarian violence, the death of millions of Iraqis, and the emergence of a power vacuum

that made way for the formation of extremist groups.<sup>26</sup> Similar arguments have been made for American interventions in neighboring countries, including Libya.<sup>27</sup>

## REDEFINING THE MIDDLE EAST

Recent decolonization efforts have contributed to minimizing the disenfranchisement of Arab influence on the world stage. That said, the region’s colonial legacy, from the drawing of its borders to its economy and linguistic character, is deeply ingrained, meaning that structural change in the near future requires significant, albeit necessary, effort. In this vein, a recent movement in relevant political, social, and academic realms advocates for a conscientious and symbolic choice to refrain from using the term “Middle East” due to its Orientalist origins. The suggested alternative is “South West Asia and North Africa,” or SWANA, which can “[speak] to the diversity of [all] communities” in the region.<sup>28</sup> In recent years, this term has gained popularity, especially in academic settings.

While the choice to rename the region is significant, it is not a sufficient solution in and of itself. In order to combat and decolonize outdated narratives about the region, its inhabitants, and all those who continue to be disenfranchised by colonial and postcolonial narratives, must claim further agency in redefining the region on their own terms. In the early days of independence, advo-

cates of liberation like Algeria's Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) and Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser had advocated for wider agency over regional affairs, and for Arabs to reclaim their own history, politics, and society. Although many 20<sup>th</sup> century actors who stood against colonial rule ultimately possessed complex motives, their commitment to redefining the region was impactful. Decades later, this mission is not yet complete. Enabling the Arab World to speak about itself more prominently, and to disrupt outdated academic, political, or media narratives, is a poignant and productive way forward.

## CONCLUSION

One could argue that colonial legacies continue to perpetuate a pattern in the Arab World through multilateral policies that are, in actuality, unilaterally imposed on the region by Western powers. There continues to be a clear indication of a stronger and a lesser power, that is, the so-called developed versus the developing world. This construct is a prominent explanation and driving force for the present and increasing trade deficit in the region, and of consistent Western interference in the internal affairs of Arab states. Acknowledging these dynamics, the first step in moving towards deconstructing and decolonizing existing narratives is recognizing them for what they are: problematic, and no longer in perpetuity.

### About the Author

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October 2022

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