The panoramic perspective of Eugene Rogan’s new 500-year history, Elias Muhanna writes, helps us look into the increasingly dated idea of a single, common Arab identity.

There is something almost old-fashioned about the idea of a shockingly long history of the Arabs. Broad, well-compiling narratives of this kind, pop up all too rarely in the 20th century, when history is frequently intersected with pan-Arab nationalist projects, and when the sense of a common Arab identity was vitally important both to the region’s inhabitants and to the foreign observers who engaged them. Today, the Arabs are increasingly viewed (and seem to view themselves) either as a small subset of a larger civilization – the Muslim world – or as a collection of idiosyncratic and fractious entities whose differences often overwhelm their commonalities. Indeed, the notion of “Arabness” as a shared and distinguishing element seems to have lost its currency as a prism through which to view the region, just as it has lost charismatic appeal in the political culture of the contemporary Middle East.

It is therefore suggestive to re-examine a panoramic perspective in Eugene Rogan’s excellent new book, which, if we are being frank, is not so much a history of the Arabs as it is a book about them, especially before the advent of the Ottoman Empire. As such, this book is not to be understood as a product of modernity and globalization; it is practically a civilizational birthright.

Rogan’s work has an entirely different thrust than the books in the aforementioned genre. Rather than laying bare the narrowness of the Arab mind, it elaborates a story of “the one people and many peoples”, with the “many” usually overwhelming the “one”. In this regard, it is an intellectual project which, despite its pan-Arab trappings, belongs solidly to a post-Arab world. The fraticulousness of today’s Middle East turns out not to be a product of modernity and globalization, it is practically a civilizational birthright. Similarly, the strained relationship with the West, all endeavoring to explain “why they hate us”, what went wrong, is explained by non-Arabs long before the advent of the modern era. The Arab mind, as a theoretical denizen of the Arab street, is not to be understood as a product of modernity and globalization. Clearly not. Rogan’s work has an entirely different thrust than the books in the aforementioned genre. Rather than laying bare the narrowness of the Arab mind, it elaborates a story of “the one people and many peoples”, with the “many” usually overwhelming the “one”. In this regard, it is an intellectual project which, despite its pan-Arab trappings, belongs solidly to a post-Arab world.

The Arabs: A History
Eugene Rogan
AlaM Lane (2002)