



Mamluk soldiers serving in Napoleon's army battle Spanish rebels in Goya's *The Second of May 1808 (The Charge of the Mamelukes)*. Kobal Art Archive / Museo del Prado Madrid

One and many

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

There is something almost old-fashioned about the idea of a book-length history of the Arabs. Broad, all-encompassing narratives of this kind were popular in the 20th century, when historiography frequently intersected with pan-Arab nationalist projects, and when the sense of a common Arab identity was vividly felt both by the region's inhabitants and the foreigners who observed and engaged them.

Today, the Arabs are increasingly viewed (and seem to view themselves) either as a small subset of a larger civilisation – the Muslim world – or as a collection of disparate 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 study the region, just as it has lost its charismatic appeal in the political culture of the contemporary Middle East.

It is therefore suggestive to re-encounter 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 political history of the Middle East and North Africa during the last 500 years – with an emphasis on the 19th and 20th centuries. The narrative begins with the Mamluk army's defeat by the Ottomans at the battle of Marj Dabiq (in northern Syria) in 1516, the event that "marked the end of the medieval era and the beginning of the modern age in the Arab world",

and then flits through the main developments of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries before slowing down the pace upon arrival at the period of European colonialism.

Telescoping deftly between bird's-eye-view narratives of large spans of history and the curious little footnotes that make for fabulous storytelling, Rogan weaves together the tales of an enormous, riotous cast of characters. We learn, for example, about the Algerian dey Husayn Pasha's attack on the French consul Pierre Deval with a fly whisk in 1827, and about the affair of Colonel Husni al-Za'im, the leader of a short-lived military government in Syria who offered Israel full normalisation of relations in 1949 (an offer that was rejected by David Ben-Gurion). Rogan's use of contemporary Arab sources (newspapers, magazines, memoirs, novels, first-hand reports) allows him to bring the reader close to the action at pivotal scenes, lending the work a very different flavour from its twentieth-century predecessors, including that of Rogan's mentor, the great Albert Hourani.

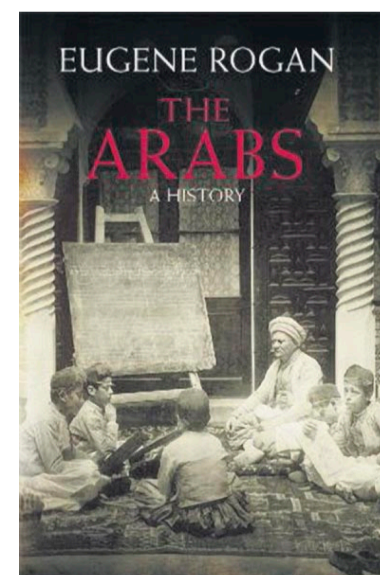
The turn of the 16th century (where Rogan picks up the thread) has also been viewed as a watershed moment in many European histories – Jacques Barzun's *From Dawn to Decadence* comes to mind – to mark the beginning of Europe's rise to dominance on the world stage. For the Arabs, according to Rogan, it is "the beginning of... history as played by other people's rules". This conceptual framework tends to obscure the fact

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that the Arab lands had been ruled by non-Arab long before the advent of the Ottoman Empire. Casting a glance back over the centuries, one notes a long history of rule by "foreigners" in the Arab Middle East: the Persian Buwayhids in the 10th century, the Seljuk Oghuz Turks and the Kurdish Ayyubid dynasty from the 11th to the 13th centuries, and the Kipchak and Circassian Turks of the Mamluk dynasties from the 13th to the 15th centuries. These elites may not have ruled from "foreign capitals", but the implication that this is a salient distinction seems to suggest that the Arabs had been the masters of their own fates before 1516.

It also begs the question of whether we can speak unproblematically about a dominant Arab political identity in the pre-modern era. In fact, as Rogan himself demonstrates, identity in the Middle East was far more fluid, a blend of sectarian, tribal, regional, and ethnic affiliations, much as it is today. One is justified in wondering, therefore, what it means to speak of "Arab" history at all. Shorn of its nationalist connotations, what salience does the term have?

Most contemporary commentators are unperturbed by such niggling methodological questions. In the absence of an "Arab nation", the Arabs have simply become those people who inhabit the "Arab street" and evince the beliefs and prejudices of the "Arab mind". Naturally, such an approach tends to invite the types of projects in which the historian plays the role of a civilisational physician:



The Arabs: A History
Eugene Rogan
Allen Lane
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diagnosing one's subject in order to prescribe neat remedies for what ails them. Since September 11, we've seen several such books published in the West, all endeavouring to explain "why they hate us", what went wrong, and who is to blame. The downfall of most of these texts lies precisely in their object of inquiry, namely the theoretical denizen of the Arab street, a durable cultural mannequin who imparts a solidity to the notion of Arab identity even as reality suggests something entirely different: a region

in which, for example, transnational non-state movements supported by Persians possess more political capital than Arab governments, and where sectarian identity consistently trumps nationalist affiliations.

Rogan's work has an entirely different thrust than the books in the aforementioned genre. Rather than laying bare the neuroses 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 fractiousness of today's Middle East turns out not to be a product of modernity and globalisation; it is practically a civilisational birthright. Similarly, the strained relationship with the West is not purely the result of neocolonial empire-building in the Gulf; it is a legacy that is centuries old.

Does this mean that there is no shared Arab legacy, or that the Middle East is only as unified, culturally-speaking, as, say, Europe? Clearly not. It simply means that, built upon the substratum of a common language, literary patrimony, and religious traditions, there are enormous differences among the region's peoples. What's more, this has always been the case.

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