Report: 9th Annual Meeting of the Committee for the History of Bilad al-Sham, Amman

Steve Tamari

In April 2012, I attended the Ninth Annual Meeting of the “Committee for the History of Bilad al-Sham”, held in the Jordanian capital of Amman.

Most representations (popular and scholarly) of the Middle East focus on Islam, the nation state, and broad social categories like gender and class. But there are other important loci of identity and history, including geographical regions.

Since the borders of most of the states of the Middle East region were drawn by European colonial powers or shaped by European colonial pressure, degrees of attachment to existing nation states among their citizens have fluctuated. Patriotism among Turks is probably fairly strong; Lebanese national identity has taken a long and tortuous road toward (still tenuous) fruition. And, today, one can’t help but worry that the current civil strife in the Syrian Arab Republic will leave that polity in tatters.

“Bilad al-Sham” is the Arabic term for geographical Syria. Though it has rarely functioned as a political unit, many of the people of the area identify with it in one way or another. Geographically, Bilad al-Sham extends from the Taurus Mountains in modern-day Turkey in the north to the Syrian steppe (which itself folds in to the Arabian Desert and encompasses the southern part of the modern Syrian republic, Jordan, and southern Israel/Palestine) in the south. East to west, it runs from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean. There is a modern political expression of “greater Syrian” nationalism in the form of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party which has had limited success in Lebanon and, to an even lesser extent, Syria. Most expressions of attachment to, and interest in, Bilad al-Sham are cultural and, in this case, scholarly-historical.

Cultural affinities defined by geography are not unique to the Middle East. Where I live, on the bluffs above the Mississippi Valley, we are considered part of the Midwest region of the US (how “mid” and why “west” has to do with historical constructions, just like “Middle East”, but that’s a topic for another discussion). “The South” and “Southern” has resonance (positive and negative) for many, as does “New England”. “North America” includes Mexico as well as Canada and some Americans feel more affinity to the former and others to the latter. Southern Florida is very much a part of the Caribbean basin and the Pacific world links much of California and the northwest to East Asia.

The Committee for the History of Bilad al-Sham was established in 1972 in Amman at the University of Jordan and has been an active player in the development of historical studies in the nation states of Bilad al-Sham and beyond. Its founder was legendary Iraqi historian Abd al-Aziz al-Duri (d. 2010), though the driving force behind it is Prof. Muhammad Adnan Bakhit. The Committee has published close to 50 monographs in Arabic and English and has held a series of international conferences. Dr. Bakhit began the process of creating a centralized repository of archival materials drawn from local and national collections in Palestine, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon (The Center for Documents and Manuscripts). The richest of these collections are the records of Ottoman-era (16th through early 20th century) courts in which one finds indications of all kinds of social and economic interaction, from marriage to murder, divorce to debt, oaths to loans. Even more important than this institutional infrastructure is that Dr. Bakhit has trained a least two generations of historians who have taken social history into universities and classrooms throughout Bilad al-Sham, the Arab world, and beyond.

This year’s international conference focused on agriculture in Bilad al-Sham from the latter years of the Byzantine period through the end of World War I. Almost 90 presentations over the course of five days
covered a host of topics. Here’s just a sample: “Astrology and Agriculture in Bilad al-Sham”, “Agricultural Technology in Bilad al-Sham during the Byzantine Period”, “Agriculture in the Ghor es-Safi (Ancient Zoar or Bela) during the Byzantine and Islamic Periods”, “Cultivation of Olives from the Byzantine through the Ottoman Periods”, “Patterns and Principles of Irrigated Market-Garden Cultivation in Ottoman Syria: Damascus, Homs, and Hama”, “Water and Its Distribution in the Lebanese Countryside during the Ottoman Period According to Monastic and Court Records”, “Fruit and Vegetable Marketing in Ottoman and Mandate Nablus”, “Mythology and Jordanian Agricultural Proverbs”, “The Orange and its Significance for Social and Economic Change in 19th-Century Jaffa”, and “Challenges Facing the Agricultural Sector in Palestine during World War I”.

Scholars of Bilad al-Sham from Morocco, Egypt, Iraq, Yemen, the US, Greece, Japan and, naturally, from Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan participated.

There was a time when I thought the only people who cared about Bilad al-Sham were card-carrying members of the SSNP or stodgy academics.

It was a nice to see so many young scholars at this conference and my pop culture adviser (Sandra) has turned me on to a couple of recent references to Bilad al-Sham. The “first lady” of Arabic hip-hop, Palestinian-Briton Shadia-Mansour mentions Bilad al-Sham in “Kufiyya Arabiya” (The Kufiyya is Arab”; thanks to Jaouad Naji for translation help):

Come on, raise the kufiyya 
Come on, raise the kufiyya 
Raise the kufiyya 
The kufiyya, the Arab kufiyya 
Raise it for Bilad al-Sham

And my personal favorite, Palestinian folk-rocker Reem Banna has adapted a traditional Palestinian ballad, “Maliki” (“What’s Wrong with You”), in which the land (barr) of al-Sham figures prominently:

What’s wrong, what’s wrong, what’s wrong with you? 
Why are you crying? 
Your father is from Barr al-Sham (Bilad al-Sham) 
And your mother comes from Mecca

Unfortunately, scholars from public universities in Syria were unable (prevented?) from attending the conference. The current crisis in Syria was on everyone’s mind with hopes that the human and cultural bonds that have nurtured this land and its people for so long would overcome the political violence that is tearing the nation apart.

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