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ROUNDTABLE

Bringing Sound into Middle East Studies

Introduction

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Over the past decade, historians have finally started listening to the past. Mark M. Smith, an American historian and a leader in this wave of sensory and sound history, has said that historians today are "listening to the past with an intensity, frequency, keenness, and acuity unprecedented in scope and magnitude."[1] However, scholars of the modern Middle East have yet to join this auditory revolution. Whether working in history, political science, anthropology, or gender studies, they are still largely producing soundproof, devocalized narratives.

There are many questions to be answered about Middle Eastern soundscapes, both past and present. How and in what ways did perceptions of "noise" in both rural and urban areas change over time—especially after the introduction of technologies such as phonographs, radios, trams, automobiles, fans, air conditioners, and factory production? What sounds did these new technologies drown out or replace? How were some of these "lost" sounds remembered? What role do master narratives have in the silencing of sounds? When did antinoise regulations begin to be legislated in the urban centers of the Middle East? What noises were considered undesirable and what desirable due to colonial or imperial tastes? How are understandings of sound and noise gendered and classed?

Let us focus on the 20th and 21st centuries, an era in which the available sounds changed dramatically with the increasing use of microphones and speaker systems, and with the introduction of automobile and air traffic; electric fans and air conditioners; recorded music, film, and, later, video; and kitchen timers and hair dryers. The contributions to this roundtable begin a long overdue conversation among scholars of the Middle East about the importance of uncovering and researching past and present sounds and soundscapes. Each serves as an example of what might be gained by considering sound in a historical, anthropological, performance, or literary study.

In addition to the methodological issues of recovering and interpreting sound, these contributions reflect on the physicality, psychology, and social context of sound, including the distinctions drawn between music and noise or the three-part relationship among performer, performance, and audience. Sound helps scholars understand the

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personal, emotional investment that goes into identifying and engaging with an ideology, a religious commitment, a cultural aesthetic, or a social identity. Deborah Kapchan examines empathetic and intentional listening, considering how this might impact events ranging from Sufi *dhikr* in Morocco to the anti-Islam posters on New York subways. Michael O'Toole asks how sound studies can reconnect the artificial division between music and noise, understanding them as interrelated and understanding "listening" as the learned process of hearing some sounds and filtering others. Lauren Osborne examines contemporary Qur'an recitation to investigate how sounds feel, particularly in a religious context, and considers the role that listening culture plays in shaping the reciter's choice of passages and recitation styles. Ziad Fahmy suggests that paying attention to the disappearing cries of water sellers in Cairo might help roll back the scholarly privileging of the visual in archival texts. G. Carole Woodall considers the case of jazz in post-Armistice Istanbul to examine how master narratives privilege some sounds and erase others. Andrea L. Stanton investigates one day's radio programming in Mandate Palestine—the day that the Peel Commission Report was released—using it as a case study to consider the basic who, what, when, where, why, and how questions of interwar radio listening. Camron Amin asks how the delivery of sounds into midcentury Iranian private spaces via radio and gramophone might be understood in terms of sensory memory. Ida Meftahi examines the discourse of "degenerate" art in 20th-century Iran, considering how *muṭrib*s, or traveling mixed-genre performers, engaged sound and other bodily and performative elements to produce a hybrid form criticized for its sensuality as much as for its "backwardness."

The contributions to this roundtable offer an embodied and multisensory approach to Middle East studies, in which sound plays a new and fruitful role. This approach is more convincingly connected to everyday people and their social realities than the silent portrayals standard in our field. The eight authors suggest different ways to listen to the region's layered history and realities, and offer sounded narratives that can push us to rethink our understanding of a lived past and present along new lines. Bringing sound into Middle Eastern studies offers numerous productive possibilities for interdisciplinary approaches to scholarship, because the acts of listening, hearing, and producing sounds are such an elemental part of the human experience.

NOTE

[1]Mark M. Smith, "Introduction: Onward to Audible Pasts," in *Hearing History: A Reader,* ed. Mark M. Smith (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2004), viiii.

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