

Arabic and Semitic Studies at Sofia University and the Shifting Interactions of Bulgaria with the Middle East and Islam

Арабистика и семитология в Софийския университет и променящите се взаимодействия на България с Близкия изток и исляма

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The Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB) in cooperation with the Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski held a three-day workshop within the activities of the international research project “Relations in the Ideospace: Middle Eastern Students in the Eastern Bloc (1950’s to 1991 on 22 – 24 July 2021. The research project has been initiated and supervised by the director of the OIB, Professor Birgit Schähler. The research is carried out by an international team of scholars in cooperation with the German Historical Institute in Moscow and the German Historical Institute in Warsaw. The project is part of the large-scale international research project “Knowledge Unbound: Internationalization, Networking, Innovation” by the Max Weber Foundation.

At the closed workshop, the members of the research team and invited guests have discussed the intermediate results of their research.

Sofia is a prime place for this particular working group. Caught up in the Soviet orbit since 1944, our scholars interested in the Middle East and Islam shared many of the strengths of the Soviet-style orientalism, including strong language training and textual orientation, and often an aversion of sociological-social historical approaches that, though introduced from the very beginning, were gradually rein-

forced since the 1990s. Some of these parallels our colleagues in Germany recognize, such as the challenge at the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) in the 1990s of how to integrate scholars trained in the “East” with those nurtured intellectually in West Germany. In Germany, I had similar observations in various academic institutions, for example at Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg that I visited as Ph.D. Candidate in 1998 during the 19th Congress of the *Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants* (UEAI).

Now let me indicate, as an insider trained in the first post-1989 decade that continued much of the former “Eastern” system how our focus on the Middle East and Islam has evolved in Bulgaria at the intersection between “East” and “West” – in the multiple meanings of these cultural and geopolitical concepts. The Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski is the only academic unit of its kind in Bulgaria and a major center for the teaching of Arabic and the study of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in Southeastern Europe. The teaching of Arabic in the curriculum of Sofia University was launched in 1964 as a minor in the then Program of Oriental Studies, where Arabic Studies in Bulgaria was offered along with Turkic Studies. Arabic Studies as a separate program was introduced as major in 1974.

By 2000, Sofia University established a separate Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies. The programs in Arabic and Islamic Studies offered by the Department prepare highly qualified specialists with proficiency in written and spoken Arabic, possessing in-depth knowledge of Arabic literature, culture, and the social and political history of the MENA region, as well as Islamic doctrine and religious-political currents. Perhaps more so than our counterparts in North America and parts of Europe, our strength remains a focus on language competence and texts – at least on the undergraduate level. However, over the last two decades we are increasingly offering much more social and political studies of the Middle East and of Islam, including through our Masters’ program and on the level of doctoral studies. For five decades, bridging the “old” and our “new” regimes, our faculty has prepared programs for the study of the Arabic language, history, literature, culture, and politics taught in a close relationship with Islamic studies as a classical European scholarly field. Having gained international recognition, the Department offers programs at the Bachelor’s, Master’s, and PhD degree levels.

Our Department takes an active part in international academic life and exchange. Faculty members work on individual and collaborative projects internationally – with academic institutions and colleagues from Western and Eastern Europe, the United States, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Many of its professors participate in the activities of prestigious international scholarly organizations of Islamicists and researchers of Arabic language and literature, and Middle Eastern culture and politics. Some of the faculty have experience as visiting professors, research fellows and language instructors in the United States, Europe (including

Germany, France, and the UK), and the Middle East. Faculty and students have various opportunities to specialize and gain fieldwork experience in countries such as Kuwait, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Qatar, and Egypt. The students have conducted their internship and practicum in state institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria, and nongovernmental and international organizations, including the UN Refugee Agency.

Throughout the last five decades, our department has had hundreds of graduates, and has continued to be among the most selective at Sofia University. Our graduates find successful careers in Bulgaria and internationally – in state institutions and the private sector, where command of Arabic is a requirement in combination with skills based on a knowledge of the history, culture, politics, and the religious situation in the Middle East. Our graduates are usually employed by agencies and companies in the fields of education and research, international relations and diplomacy, translation and interpretation, media and journalism, public administration, international trade and private businesses, as well as by organizations in the nongovernmental sector.

Our current faculty includes 10 full-time professors, associate professors and assistant professors in Arabic linguistics, Arabic literature, and Middle East history and Islamic studies. Our work is assisted by more than 15 part-time lecturers – not only Arabic language instructors but also colleagues from related departments and scientific institutions beyond Sofia University.

Established when Bulgaria was part of the former “Eastern Bloc” with its transnational “order of knowledge”,¹ the Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies reflects the continuities and changes combining the features of the local, Bulgarian context with a shared East European and Balkan intellectual trajectory. Before the Communist era, “Oriental” studies were introduced in the first half of the 20th century by scholars with a classical training in Ottoman, Arabic, and Persian languages and cultures obtained in countries including Germany and Switzerland. Some of them worked at the National Library (located opposite the Rectorate of Sofia University where you are now) that preserves one of the largest manuscript collections in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish worldwide. In that early, pre-Communist era, the academic interest in Oriental studies in Bulgaria was clearly inspired by the Ottoman legacy in the Balkans. This legacy needed to be preserved and understood even in a time of rapid and all-embracing de-Ottomanization.

Our specific historical circumstances contingent on the Cold War and the Iron Curtain shaped how “Oriental” studies developed here. It was, indeed, nurtured by the need to prepare experts in Arabic language, Islam, and the Middle East,

¹ An “order of knowledge” is thus related also to the dominant narratives of disciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity. For a recent account, see Jürgen Mittelstrass, “The Order of Knowledge: From Disciplinarity to Transdisciplinarity and Back”, *European Review* 26, Suppl. 52 (2018): 568–75.

although the former Soviet Union was ready to educate Bulgarian students in Moscow or Leningrad. Nevertheless, in this shared Communist “ideoscape”, to use Appadurai’s term,² Bulgaria sought to pursue its own policies and attracted thousands of students from the MENA region on the ground of a shared ideology with leftist groups and regimes, such as the ones in Baghdad, Damascus or Algiers, among others. These interactions were part of a structurally embedded “grand narrative” but in terms of social history, their consequences still await an in-depth research, including through approaches like Eickelman’s version of the notion of “social biography”³ (including what has happened to those graduates in the Arab world, what type of careers have they pursued).

To conclude, I am honoured to welcome you to Sofia University. Our Department – currently in its third, post-1989, period of Oriental Studies in Bulgaria – is pleased to host this meeting under a major project of Orient Institut Beirut, one of the most important German and European academic bodies in the Middle East. Wishing you a fruitful work at Sofia University, I emphasize that our Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies is open to further cooperation and collaborative initiatives with the Orient Institut Beirut.

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² Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy”, *Theory, Culture & Society* 7, 6 (1990): 295–310.

³ Dale F. Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco: The Education of a Twentieth Century Notable* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 14–15.