



### Summary

*Decolonization of the Middle East has been one of the most debated issues of the recent historical studies both in the west and east. Prof. Ussama Makdisi of Rice University argues, pointing out to the existing western dominance in the region including recent US' invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, that decolonization of the Middle East and Muslim World, in wider context, continues because full emancipation of people and politics from unequal imperial relations has not been realized.*

*He argues that the vast majority of the professional study of the Arab world remains located outside the Arab world, and more specifically within Western academic and policy centers which typically answer to Western concerns, questions and agendas, not Arab or Middle Eastern ones. He advises scholars and historians of the Middle East to study and write their own decolonization history free from western imperial dominance.*

### Decolonizing Arab History

*by Professor Ussama Makdisi*

Prof. Ussama Makdisi, one of the most insightful voices that challenges the narratives of failure, pessimism, and disillusionment in the Middle East and as well as in the world about the solutions to the crisis we face, such as political conflict, violence, sectarianism and corruption, has mainly focused on the roots of decolonization process in the Middle East in his lecture titled "Decolonizing Arab History".

Prof. Makdisi argues that existing scholarship for most of the modern history, including Turkey and Arab world, have either been colonial or heavily influenced by the reality of colonial worldviews that shaped so much of our contemporary international order, including the Middle East. He underlines that western dominance in the Muslim world, which have been mostly associated with the US invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, the situation in Palestine, western military bases throughout the Middle East or drone strikes against Muslim populations, underlines the continuation of persistent colonial violence and orientalism. He highlights that contemporary Arab world is still actively colonized, although most of the scholars in the west study and teach colonization as an historical event.

According to the Prof. Makdisi, decolonization can only be discussed with the full emancipation of people and politics from unequal imperial relations, and if decolonization is not tied to an active commitment to liberation and equality, the notion of decolonizing anything is surely a meaningless academic slogan. Reminding the invasions of Iraq in the 21st century, he underlines that decolonizing in the Middle East has not finished, and the Arab world remains until today subject to Western colonialism, or our current crisis in the region are the direct consequences of this colonialism.

Describing "Decolonizing History" as an ethical and political project, as much as it is a pedagogical project insofar as our commitment to equality and liberation is essential to any truly secular history of humanity, Prof. Makdisi criticizes methodology of decolonization studies. He points out the reluctance or failure of scholars to study the reasons why the Arab world became colonized much later than other parts of the World, such as Latin America and Africa. He underlines that the colonization of Arab world after WWI happened in the name of self-determination and then in the name of religious freedom, when previously independent societies in the Middle East were coercively subjected to open ended European tutelage with the Article twenty two of the League of Nations that invented the fiction of mandates to justify a racial and colonial hierarchy. He states that, despite what most people think until today, Woodrow Wilson's notion of self-determination was not anti-colonial, and for Wilson, self-determination meant racialized paternalism because he believed that self-determination was applicable only to certain peoples, namely white people in Europe, and not all peoples. Wilson





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was not interested in abolishing colonialism, but rather in regulating and institutionalizing colonialism along new paternalistic lines that opened a certain limited space for certain colonized peoples to petition what Wilson believed to be a manifestly superior Anglo-Saxon or French power and tutelage. For Wilson, self-determination did not apply to the oppressed blacks, African-Americans in the United States, or, to the indigenous population already colonized in the West. It was this form of racist tutelage that gave birth to the colonial system, known as the Mandates, that created the borders of colonized states of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine after World War I.

*“Decolonizing History is as an ethical and political project, as much as it is a pedagogical project insofar as our commitment to equality and liberation is essential to any truly secular history of humanity”*

Based on this critique, Professor Makdisi advises several points for a proper methodology of decolonizing Eurocentric history. He argues that, first, we must acknowledge the fact that decolonizing history requires talking about a current colonial condition and unequal relations in the Middle East. Secondly, decolonization of Arab history requires banishing the insidious idea that is at the heart of so much colonial and contemporary discourse in the Arab world: This is the idea of an advanced secular and liberal West versus the traditional and backward Middle East. This false assumption about the morally superior West has been repeated especially by liberal intellectuals as an unproblematic place of salvation, aid assistance, culture, progress, science, technology, secularism, and freedom. Professor Makdisi notes that assumptions about Enlightened and liberal West is a profound misreading of what, in fact, the complexity of Western states, and their colonial relationship with the Middle East. He argues that this is also an Orientalist projection, depicting Europe and America as an idealized world, and then use this

fiction to justify supremacy over all other non-Western cultures, including Islamic ones.

Prof. Makdisi asserts that the intellectual decolonization of the Arab East requires and demands the historicization of the West and the Middle East. Thus, this historicization would stop idealizing the West in order to advance claims about injustice in the East. For example, describing sectarianism in the Middle East, like racism in Europe and America, as a problem of modernity and modern geopolitical formulations would allow us to start much more difficult and politically much more challenging task of understanding conditions and histories of injustice and equality, and support the struggles for justice and equality in different parts of the world, instead of endorsing the problems with fatalistic clichés about east and west. He advises Turkish scholars to work on the history of Arab provinces or the Arab world as an essential part of Ottoman history entangled with the history of Turkey, and urges Arab scholars to work on Ottoman experience, stop to identify the Ottoman Empire only with Turkey. By recovering the significance of the Ottoman past of the modern Arab Middle East, contemporary scholars can recognize that Arab populations were free and equal citizens of a reforming Ottoman polity, not colonial subjects of Turkey. This way, they can also better see how European Mandate system colonized the free and independent Arab populations after WWI in the name of their freedom from Turkish yoke.

*“Intellectual decolonization of the Arab East requires and demands the historicization of the West and the Middle East”*

Thirdly, he underlines that decolonizing Arab history means recognizing the problem that the vast majority of the professional study of the Arab world remains located outside the Arab world, and more specifically within Western academic and policy centers which typically answer to Western concerns, questions and agendas, not



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Arab or Middle Eastern ones. Prof. Makdisi points out to the fact that studies about the Middle East that have been mainly done by the oil wealth sponsored U.S. institutions and universities are totally divorced from meaningful, critical and emancipatory humanistic academic inquiry. Meanwhile, proud universities in the Middle East are experiencing its worst financial, economic, and political crisis of its history.

Finally, he states that decolonizing Arab history means engaging with and developing research agendas that speak to the concerns of people in the Arab world and the Middle East more broadly. In this context, he highlights the situation of Palestine, describing it as a metaphor for injustice and the dream of liberation in our part of the world for a century.

He also argues that decolonizing means owning our own history without being blind to the history of others, namely engaging honestly with taboo subjects, but also asking why these subjects became taboo in the first instance. Thus, he points out the fact that if the states do not narrate their own history for decolonization, others, especially western authors would write from their perspective. Makdisi argues that decolonization in its truest sense should lead us to a more secular, a more honest and more ecumenical, a more worldly community that celebrates the plurality of human experience far more than the narrower, sectarian, and nationalist communities in which we are so often trapped.

*“Decolonizing means owning our own history without being blind to the history of others, namely engaging honestly with taboo subjects”*

In sum, Prof. Makdisi is changing the Orientalist script about the failure of the Middle Eastern Arab modernity due to defects in Arab culture and society. His alternative narrative emphasize that late Ottoman Arab societies

were more ecumenical and inclusive, and more pluralistic than Western societies. Thus, Europeans who came to colonize the Middle East did not bring better ideas of pluralism, democracy, constitutionalism impact. On the contrary, they actively undermined and destroyed it. He criticizes scholar’s description of colonization as an event of the past, and argues that recent events in the Middle East, such as invasion of Iraq by the US, oppression of Palestinian people, or ongoing crisis in Syria, clearly shows that colonization continues. He advises scholars in the Middle East to narrate their history rather than leaving it to western scholars because they need to rescue their history from orientalism and colonialism, and re-writes from their perspective.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor Ussama Makdisi is a faculty member of the History Department at Rice University, and is the president of the Arab-American Educational Foundation at the same university. He completed his undergraduate studies at Wesleyan University in 1990 and his Ph.D. at Princeton University in 1997. Makdisi’s interests include modern Arab history, US-Arab relations, Ottoman history, and the history of missionaries and sectarianism. Professor Makdisi’s “Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World” (2019), “Faith Misplaced: the Broken Promise of US-Arab Relations, 1820-2001” (2010), “Artillery of Heaven” : American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East” (2008), “The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon” (2000), and “Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa” (2006) publications have been translated into many languages. He has been engaged in studies in many areas and is the recipient of many international awards.



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ABOUT THE PROJECT

### Imagining A Common Horizon for Humanity and the Planet

The world is passing through an extremely troubled period in its history, with a seemingly new challenge encountered at every turn. Serious economic, social, cultural, environmental and political crises at a global level are exacerbated by those being felt in individual countries. The challenges we are facing take a variety of forms, from financial collapses to climate change, from international terrorism to regional conflicts, and from the refugee problem to xenophobia.

All of these crises are being aggravated by the impact of the pandemic, revealing the inability of humanity to tackle them collectively, and invalidating the romantic discourse of globalization. As history continues its march, we are reminded that the answer to the common problems of humanity cannot be found by becoming more introverted, polarized or prejudiced. No matter how severe our problems, our destiny should not be seen as unchangeable. The problems we experience are primarily a result of human activity, and can be overcome only through human effort, but we should remain aware that there are many different hurdles to be passed if we are to rid ourselves of the crises being experienced in many parts of the world.

Only through conscious, patient and collective effort can we overcome the problems of humanity. Now is the time for dignified people from the different cultures and geographies of the world to come together in solidarity. It is time to speak with full respect of human dignity, setting aside the importance we place in our individual identities. An alliance of people who see truth and justice as the major pillars of our kind, will be able to open the door to a new era of solidarity for humanity. A dignified future is possible. We believe that Turkey holds a special, if not privileged, position, based on its geographical, historical and cultural characteristics, and can serve as a host to this joint effort of humanity.

Our goal within the scope of this project is to bring together the leading thinkers of the world, to create an international intellectual platform that draws its strength from human dignity, and that aims to build for the future of humanity and the planet with a holistic synergy with a view to offering humanity a common horizon. As Cappadocia University, our vision in this regard is to provide an academic platform from where esteemed intellectuals from around the world can share their visions for a common future of humanity and our planet, and to comment on the challenges and opportunities they envisage.

You can find detailed information about the Project at <https://commonhorizon.kapadokya.edu.tr/en/>

Cappadocia University (<https://kapadokya.edu.tr/en/>) is a young foundation (private) university in central Turkey, Cappadocia. The main goal of the university is to raise generations of opinion leaders who can read the 21st century realistically, and whose views therefore carry weight and significance – go-to men and women who are highly knowledgeable in their fields, who are happy to share their knowledge, and who will thus be respected and trusted by others. Cappadocia University is home to a highly successful dual-pronged system of academic and vocational programs that act in support of each other.

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