

BOOK REVIEW

Teachers as State-Builders: Education and the Making of the Modern Middle East

By Hilary Falb Kalisman. Princeton University Press, 2022. 274 pages. Hardcover, \$90.00 USD, ISBN: 9780691204338. Paperback, \$29.95, ISBN: 9780691234250. Ebook, \$29.95, ISBN: 9780691204321.

Betty Anderson

Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts, USA
Email: banderso@bu.edu

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In *Teachers as State-Builders: Education and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Hilary Falb Kalisman, Assistant Professor of History and Endowed Professor of Israel/Palestine Studies in the Program in Jewish Studies, at the University of Colorado Boulder, follows teachers as they moved through the schools of the late Ottoman Empire, the successor British mandates, and into the era of the states' independence after World War II. By following this chronology, Kalisman interrogates the role that teachers played in the decades-long debates about state, nation, society, gender, and modernity that took place across the Levant.

At the core of this important book is the extensive research that Kalisman conducted in archives and government offices in Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon, and in relevant locales in the US and UK. Through the use of memoirs and government reports, she forefronts the voices of the teachers, above all else, alongside the inspectors and colonial and state agents charged with establishing the educational systems in their regions. I do not know of any other book on education in the Middle East with this breadth of primary sources. This remarkable collection makes the book an invaluable resource for anyone undertaking research on education across of swath of the Levant.

Kalisman takes as her canvas the regions that transitioned from provinces of the Ottoman Empire to the Iraqi, Transjordanian, and Palestinian mandates, and with forays to Syria, Lebanon and Egypt for comparable examples. Until the post-WWII era of state consolidation, the teachers Kalisman follows moved frequently from one posting to another within their districts and across the mandate borders. Little standardization existed in the curriculum of the schools or the training required of the teachers. So few teachers existed in most decades that state supervisors rarely punished any for their political activism or similar transgressions because they needed these teachers to take on these posts. The teachers frequently toggled back and forth between positions in schools and government offices because they stood as the educated vanguard needed for these new roles.

In studying these teachers, Kalisman adds mobility to the definition scholars determined for the *effendiyya* – the young, educated and politically active members of these societies – as a way to articulate how fluid the borders and societal and national identities were in this region for much of the twentieth century. By so doing, she taps into Middle Eastern research of recent years that problematizes the borders that have become the modern states of today. Kalisman makes an important claim for why following the teachers as they moved around the Levant helps researchers understand similarities of state construction and gender and identity formation that existed before the borders became real impediments, precisely because these male and female teachers represented a new, educated elite. If they moved from the schoolrooms into government offices, they brought their experiences into their new roles as institution builders. In addition, Kalisman uses these teachers to highlight the many

and varied debates about how society could modernize and women could be educated during these eras. Functioning within educational systems that had not yet been systematized gave these teachers leeway to write new rules for the schoolroom and the larger society and states being formed.

Likewise, Kalisman writes about the “textual movement” (p. 3) these teachers undertook as they taught their students and wrote about nation, state, and society in the late Ottoman period and during the interwar mandates. Many of these teachers wrote in their government reports, their newspaper and magazine articles, and their memoirs about such ideas as the Arab nation and Communism. Examining them as a stratum, frequently moving across the region and engaged in debates with their fellow teachers, enables Kalisman to focus on how they defined these terms during the decades of border fluidity. She similarly interrogates what they meant by political activism in one era after another. Their movements brought them into networks of other teachers similarly discussing and taking action on all these issues.

Kalisman ends the book by examining the changing circumstances for teachers in the post-independence era, when borders did become more fixed and state construction involved the massive expansion of educational institutions. Kalisman makes the claim that the societal role of the teacher shifted inversely with the standardization and control that accompanied this expansion.

Students with little background in Middle Eastern history will find the organizational structure difficult to follow, however. In one sense, choosing to reach across the region and negate the later borders and states lends itself to focusing on the teachers, their movements and their ideas instead of the established histories of each state. On the other hand, Kalisman relies on the primary sources so extensively she does not provide sufficient historical context for the non-specialist to find a foothold into the text. A Middle Eastern scholar or graduate student will be able to make the necessary connections.

In all, Kalisman provides a fine-grained study of teachers, schools and nascent state bureaucracies from the Ottoman era until well into the twentieth century. This is an invaluable study for researchers interested in the intersection of education, societal change, and state formation during these decades.