Re-examining Al-Jabarti's Accounts about the French Campaign on Egypt (1798-1801)

talk by

Suha Kudsieh

Napoleon’s campaign on Egypt (1798-1801) is celebrated in history books as a pivotal event that triggered Arab awakening (nahda); nevertheless, some critics regard the resistance of the Egyptians as symptomatic of a civilization clash between the East and the West caused mainly by Islam, a clash that has not narrowed since then and continues to plague bilateral cultural interactions.

In this talk, Suha Kudsieh will compare the accounts written by the French (Denon and Fourier’s, among others) with Al-Jabarti’s (1754-1822) accounts. Al-Jabarti, a well-known Egyptian historian, witnessed the events of the campaign and recorded his observations in three different accounts. She will highlight the cultural misunderstandings that took place between the two groups, arguing that the main reason behind the rebellion was replacing the Ottoman taxation and legal code with the Napoleonic code. Next she will examine the ramifications of the new code on the lives of Egyptians, explaining how it transformed and disrupted social ties. Bearing in mind that the new code was similarly unpopular at the time among the Austrians and the Italians, the reaction of the Egyptians was not unique. Therefore, religious differences alone do not explain the events that unfolded in Egypt after 1798.

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