



## THE TEMPORARY ILLUSION OF FREEDOM BESHARA DOUMANI

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One of the defining aspects of intellectual life is the seemingly unbridgeable gap between vision and praxis. In the pursuit of truth one never arrives, but must constantly strive. Like many of the Fellows this year, I was not always satisfied with the results of my and other’s efforts, but I deeply appreciated and learned from the creativity and dedication that surrounded me in abundance.

The impossibility of arriving has another more mundane dimension. Intellectuals are for the most part located in academic institutions that officially promote a culture of innovation, but which are in reality increasingly hierarchical and centralized corporate structures whose funding policies, more often than not, serve the interests of the very forces that

those intellectuals who want to make a difference seek to undermine. Thus, the schizophrenic world many of us experience: hoped-for changes are tantalizingly within sight, but always out of reach.

It is no wonder then, that I tremendously enjoyed my year at Wiko. In this institution I had the freedom, or at least the temporary illusion of freedom, to focus only on what I think matters most. At the same time, the confining isolation of disciplinary specialization was lifted and I was thrust into a world of intellectual cultures that, to my shame, I found to be surprisingly foreign. The opportunity, on a daily basis, to wander into (and to wonder at) formerly distant worlds now located only a table-width away became intoxicating. This is why going back to the University may prove to be as difficult as kicking a heroin addiction. This is only a slight exaggeration; for it is precisely this richly diverse world of ideas and insights that so clearly reveals the confining webs we have spun (or allowed others to spin) around ourselves. Like many of my colleagues here, I will sorely miss being in an institution whose mission is to nurture the very essence of who we are.

Of course, “We” are but a small and often disconnected minority. To think that we alone can recreate the world in our image is a dangerous illusion that has long been recognized as such. Still, the fact of arriving before September 11 and before the uncontrollable downward spiral of violence in Palestine/Israel could not shield someone like myself, who is specialized in the history of the modern Middle East. I was not able, therefore, to work on my own projects as much as I could otherwise have done. With family and friends directly affected by these events, I found it difficult to focus, especially during the spring when the Israeli army unleashed a number of military campaigns to destroy the infrastructure of the Palestinian Authority and to reoccupy the West Bank. In addition, I accepted a series of speaking engagements, radio interviews, and the like. Most important perhaps, I did not have much of an opportunity to discuss my project with the Fellows and staff at Wiko, as most conversation inevitably turned to the current political situation. There were exceptions of course, the major one being a wonderful series of exchanges with David Sabeau, who is also specialized in family history. I also benefited a great deal from conversations with German scholars and doctoral students, especially the group around Gudrun Krämer at Free University.

I came here with two projects. The first was to finish an edited volume of original research articles on family history in the Middle East, the first of its kind. This took longer than expected; for whereas I was able to write my own contribution to the volume fairly quickly, the amount of work involved in editing the chapters of the other contributors and

in manuscript preparation was considerable. I also allowed myself to fall into the wonderful trap of in-depth reading in preparation for writing the introduction, a process which took several weeks, but which will pay out long-term dividends in the future.

With this manuscript completed by mid-January, I immediately started my second project: making close to two hundred kilos of primary documents that I brought with me in a fit of optimism – mostly legal records of the cities of Nablus (Palestine) and Tripoli (Lebanon) dated from 1660 to 1860 – say something about family history in the provincial cities of the Ottoman Empire, a topic we know virtually nothing about. The challenge I faced was to come up with a methodology for reading, a theoretical framework for analyzing, and a narrative structure for integrating thousands of disconnected and un-indexed court appearances ranging from endowment of trusts and real-estate transactions to lawsuits and probate inventories. Specifically, I looked for patterns – both in terms of form and content and across space and time – that can shed light on the complex relationships between property devolution strategies, gender, and the praxis of Islamic law.

I have made substantial progress on this front despite the traumatic events of this spring and the continuing process of copy-editing, proofreading, and indexing the first manuscript. In fact, I am now just about ready to start writing and dearly wish that I could have another year at Wiko to do just that. Instead, I will be going back to a heavy teaching load, postponed exams and projects of graduate students, committee work, and a university that finds itself in an unexpected financial and structural crisis. So it will be at least a year or two before I can start picking up the pieces of this project again, and when I do, I will fondly remember the supportive staff and the exciting colleagues who have helped to make it all possible.