



# Mapping the Middle East

*By Zayde Antrim*

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he Middle East is a term that is not only geographic but mental in nature. More often than not, it has come to conjure a host of negative images and generalisations that are often seen in media and Hollywood blockbusters.

The term gained more traction and specificity in the middle of the 20th century as American obsession grew with the region following the 9/11 attacks.

Little is it known that the 'Middle East' as a term started circulating in Europe in the 19th century and was coined by the British Empire to distinguish its very own colonial projects and interests in the Levant (which became known as the 'Near East' from London's perspective) from its projects and interests in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan ('the Middle East' from London's perspective) and its colonies in present-day Malaysia and Singapore (which became known as 'the Far East'). It is astonishing that such essentially imperialistic terms that were merely expressions of directional orientation have persisted until the present day and made it into our everyday vocabulary.

This is something that Zayde Antrim discusses in the opening parts of her astonishing book *Mapping the Middle East*. The book is essentially a concise history of mapping in and of a region that is commonly referred to as the 'Middle East' both by Western and Muslim geographers and cartographers. It is a shifting region, without any precise boundaries, as I came to realise myself a few years ago when I came across a 19th-century map depicting my home country, Bosnia and Herzegovina, as 'the Near East' - which was back then an Ottoman *wilayat*. (I still find it fascinating that only a 150 years ago, my forefathers in Bosnia could freely traverse to the outer boundaries of what is present-day Syria and Iraq and still be within the boundaries of their country - the Ottoman Empire). After the Hapsburg Empire occupied Bosnia in 1878, the country began to be depicted in European maps as clearly a part of Europe. It remains as such today. It was then that I concluded that geography is closely intertwined with cultural and religious zones.

As Antrim notes "most histories of cartography are still strikingly Eurocentric, and those that do deal with other parts of the world tend to emphasize their encounters with Europe and European maps from the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries on" (p.9). To counter such a narrative, the author of this book devotes only one chapter - out

of five - to maps made by Europeans in the context of colonial encounters.

Within these chapters, the author covers one-thousand years, spanning from the 11th to the 21st century, and simultaneously achieves three objectives. First and foremost, the book pays homage to the rather long history of mapping the Middle East. Second, it deconstructs the euro-centric approach to viewing the Middle East and the wider Islamic world. Third, it depicts the very much forgotten centuries-old practice of mapping by Muslim geographers.

In Chapter One, the book explores ways in which a region that came to be known as the 'realm of Islam' was mapped between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries with a heavy emphasis on the existing religious diversities in the early Islamic empires. In chapter two, the author argues that Ottoman mapping traditions emerging in the sixteenth century were in fact expressions of belonging in meaningful regions, rather than claims to territory or sovereignty. Chapter three covers the continental division of the world that began in the late 17th century and early 18th century Ottoman Empire and shows a number of impressive and stunningly accurate maps of the world. Chapter four analyses the rise of national mapping in the twentieth century that is in conjunction with the rise of the nation-state bounded territories and homogenous populations. Finally, chapter five once again returns to supranational states and supranational mapping in the context of large Muslim organisations such as the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Arab League.

This book does not replace the 'Middle East' with a more 'accurate' term, nor is it a history of cartography. The author does not evaluate maps as exemplars of technical achievement or in terms of the accuracy of their representation. Instead, she skillfully sketches in numerous layers the contours of and relationships between mapping traditions over a long chronological period stretching nearly a millennia and explores the ideas that maps convey, which are always historically and culturally contingent. Her analysis is very nuanced and contextual, yet sensible and logical. It is fascinating how the author manages to cover such a large period of Islamic history, spanning from the 'realm of Islam' (11th to 16th centuries) and ending with the present-day war in Syria. I must say that for myself as a journalist covering the

Balkans, Turkey and the Middle East this book is a window into a fascinating subject that I have had little chance to read about before, but come across in my daily work.

Antrim expansively uses primary sources and provides a much-needed alternative to the Eurocentric imperial narrative. The author's outstanding knowledge and superb handling of the subject matter deserves respect. After all, an author's ability to story-tell a complex subject in a language understandable by the average reader is by itself a testament to her utmost command of the topic. It is pleasingly-written, very readable, and well-compiled. It is academic, yet reads like a novel, and with eighty-two rarely seen images, the book is a visual feast that keeps the reader's attention should it ever subside.

Antrim's inquisitive mind, her simple language and creative style of relating today's geopolitical upheavals in the Middle East within their historical context makes this book a crucial piece of literature to anyone studying the region, particularly to students in Europe, United States and Canada whose syllabi still tend to provide a very Eurocentric, but also skewed and distorted image of the Muslim world.