

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: Islamists, Arab nationalists, and Orientalists have all used notions about the Muslim family and Muslim law, as well as the encounter with Europe in the early 19th century to explain society in the Middle East. But when historian Beshara Doumani set out to explore these notions, he found almost no actual scholarship had been done.

Delving deep into two centuries of local records in the Eastern Mediterranean, Doumani did not discover the, quote unquote, "typical Arab family." Instead, he uncovered a world of differences in how the institution of family was understood and organized. Join us today as he discusses his new book *Family Life in the Ottoman Mediterranean*.

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Beshara, thank you for being here today.

BESHARA I'm so glad to be speaking with you.

DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: Your book sets out to overturn-- it seems to me-- some basic and enduring assumptions about family and Sharia courts, and this notion that, prior to the encounter with Europe, the beginning of modernity, which is in the early 19th century, there was such a thing as a typical Arab family or a typical Muslim family. What is reductive and wrong about this notion, and how is it used ideologically?

BESHARA
DOUMANI: The basic point I would make is that much literature on the Arab world and the Middle East, in general, is-- especially in the social sciences-- is based on this assumption that the two key institutions that made the society what it is are family and religion, specifically Sharia. And to them, that explains why the Middle East is the way it is today, how it came to be, and what its future might be like. The problem is that these assumptions are not based on historical study of family life or of daily legal practices that we might call the Sharia.

INTERVIEWER: But so, how are those notions so embedded that we don't even see that they're not founded?

BESHARA So, because they're so ideologically important.

DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: Explain.

BESHARA This is a common problem in the social sciences and other modes of knowledge reduction.

DOUMANI: When something is really ideologically important to a current political project, you almost always never find historical study of it because that kind of messes up the assumption to begin with. It's used to explain, for example, the lack of democracy, entrepreneurial spirit, and many other so-called ills of that part of the world.

The Arab nationalists, for example, consider the Arab family to be the building block of that society. That's what makes us Arabs, they would say. Islamists often talk about this harmonious relationship between family and Sharia as having existed until the encounter with the West. And that is why they say, we must live under the Sharia as before.

INTERVIEWER: Because it was sort of a cataclysmic collision.

BESHARA Yes. And Orientalists see it exactly the other side of the coin-- [LAUGHS]-- which is family and

DOUMANI: Sharia in the traditional Arab or Muslim societies is what explains why these societies are so different from us, in fact--

INTERVIEWER: So it others them in a way.

BESHARA --the opposite of us. It's like looking in a mirror. And that's why they must be reformed. So, in

DOUMANI: fact, the big discussions in public discourse in the newspapers and in the academy for the last 100 years or so has been really revolving around two questions-- how, or should, the family be changed, and how, or should, the Sharia be reformed?

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm. This makes me wonder something I hadn't wondered before. When you say, in the academy, and we talk about Middle East scholarship, we're talking about Western scholarship. Has this been studied in the Middle East by Middle Eastern historians?

BESHARA When I started looking at the books on the history of the family in the area, for example, I was
DOUMANI: interested in, which is the eastern Mediterranean, I couldn't find anything in the mid '90s, not a single book on history of the Arab family that was a product of a serious historical study. So that's the first puzzle. Why is it that the family and religion are frequently invoked but not studied?

INTERVIEWER: So you set out to study what was really going on. You chose to study a family in Nablus and one in Tripoli over two centuries, from the 1660s to the 1860s. And you chose to study the waqf. Did I pronounce that right?

BESHARA You did.

DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: Can you explain your approach? Why these two cities, why these two families, why this period of time, and why the waqf?

BESHARA Sure. I chose these for a very specific purpose because these are the forgotten centuries, the
DOUMANI: 1660s, the 1860s. These are the forgotten places, the provincial, regional, social spaces that are not Cairo or Damascus or Istanbul. And this is the forgotten institution, a legal institution, the waqf, which can be quickly defined as kind of an endowment or a trust in which people, for the charitable purposes, endow this property, move it from their ownership to the ownership of God, and use the revenues to support a variety of charitable purposes.

But in the case of the family waqf, there was a kind of an insertion between the time of the endowment and the time of the revenues reaching that charitable purpose, which is to say, the revenue should go to my descendants until their extinction. And then-- so actually, it was a way of-- I describe it as the creation of a family charter that gives us enormous insight into what people at that time believed family was and how it should be organized and reproduced.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, it's like a tool for designing-- almost for mapping out your belief system. And your--

BESHARA And the property devolution strategy--

DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: Right, and--

BESHARA --combine both a moral and a cultural understanding what family is, but it was also a
DOUMANI: mechanism, a very, actually, expressive and flexible mechanism for designing a property devolution strategy before one died.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. So you found that these two families approached the waqf very differently, right?

BESHARA Well, this was a second puzzle of the book. The second puzzle was not one that I was ready
DOUMANI: for. I did not believe, or expect, that the sources would lead me to this conclusion. But, in fact,

Nablus and Tripoli were very different from each other, in terms of how the institution of the waqf was used, even though they lived in the same imperial space and the same cultural zone of greater Syria, or Bilad al-Sham--

INTERVIEWER: So that sort of upended--

BESHARA --and under the same legal system, which is the Sharia.

DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: So that sort of upends this assumption of this sort of monolithic family--

BESHARA Right.

DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: --and religion.

BESHARA It basically tells us there is no such thing as an typical, traditional Arab, Muslim, Mediterranean
DOUMANI: family.

INTERVIEWER: Talk about how they were different.

BESHARA Well, the primary difference was the inclusion or exclusion of women from the property
DOUMANI: devolution. So in the case of Tripoli, for example, over 98% of all waqf endowments included daughters and other women.

INTERVIEWER: Wow. Even in the 17th century.

BESHARA Yes.

DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: And 18th century.

BESHARA Yes, they were included, whereas, in Nablus, overwhelming majority excluded daughters or
DOUMANI: the female children of sons from the property that was endowed or the revenues of the property that was endowed.

INTERVIEWER: So what does that say about those two different societies?

BESHARA Well, it says that they had very different concerns when it came to defining who are the kin that
DOUMANI: count. [LAUGHS] And that means how property and power relations and hierarchies in the

household worked, what were the expectations of children about what they will or will not inherit from their parents, and so on and so forth. It also affected marriage strategies and a whole range of issues about women's access to productive commercial properties.

INTERVIEWER: So a lot was at stake.

BESHARA DOUMANI: An enormous amount was at stake because this is a situation whereby, not just in Nablus and Tripoli, but tens of millions of people in the Ottoman domains from the Balkans all the way to the Arabian Peninsula.

And daily decisions about how to devolve their properties through waqf instantiated in assumptions or ways of organizing the meaning of family, the moral order of kinship or relationship of people to each other, in future generations to each other, through this mechanism. In other words, they defined what the family is, and the entire social structure of these areas was done one act at a time. And we cannot underst--

INTERVIEWER: Unmarried to feeling?

BESHARA DOUMANI: Yeah, and very differently. There was a wide diversity of ways of organizing family life, which means there was no one specific form for Middle Eastern or Arab societies before the encounter, before the West, and not one specific form afterwards. There was a huge diversity before and with enormous legacies for how their societies are organized today.

INTERVIEWER: Well, as you're saying this, I'm thinking, why is that-- why is that surprising? Like, where else would we assume this sort of simplicity and this monolithic quality?

BESHARA DOUMANI: Yeah, it's not unusual, Middle East studies, for really radical findings to sound very common sense to people when they think about their own society. But that's because the Middle East and Muslim societies, in general, have been studied as exceptional. And when you realize that, in fact, they may not be so exceptional, that they had an enormous range of difference within them, that challenges our views of what they were like supposedly, then everything falls into place. And you have a much better understanding.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: We're talking today with historian Beshara Doumani about his new book *Family Life in the Ottoman Mediterranean*. This is *Trending Globally*.

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Am I understanding this correctly, that the Sharia court, when someone died, would have determined what happened to that person's property and wealth, but by having a waqf while you're alive, you kind of do an end run around that, right? So how do you explain how the courts and the law, Sharia law, was so at odds with what people actually wanted to do?

BESHARA DOUMANI: So you're right. There's a big difference between inter vivos and post-mortem forms of inheritance. After somebody dies, there's actually a clear set of rules in Islamic law about who gets what, for example, what would a mother get, what would a father get, a brother, a sister. What if you had only daughters or only one daughter, or et cetera? All these, then, produced different formulas for who would get what. But most people did not wait for that. They wanted to have a say in the devolution of their properties before they died.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, and there were-- there, you describe this, it's almost performative, as--

BESHARA Yeah, so--

DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: --this ceremonial--

BESHARA DOUMANI: Yes, it was a very big deal to endow your properties as a waqf. In a way, you were declaring the foundation of a family. And, in fact, family as we know it today is really a product of this ambiguous use of the family waqf over this period of two centuries and continuing on till the end of the 19th century. It's not a way to have an end run around the court. The court actually is what facilitated these practices.

INTERVIEWER: But it preempted what the court would have said if you allowed yourself to die without a waqf, right?

BESHARA DOUMANI: Right, but it's not so much the place of the court to have a position on this. The court existed in every town and city in the Ottoman Empire. And it was a very important state institution that facilitated the governance of property relations on the local level. The waqf is a legitimate pious act, so it's not like people invented the waqf in order to do this end run. In fact, it's considered the greatest form of charity because, ultimately, all these revenues will go to charitable purposes.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, really?

BESHARA What really the waqf facilitated is to keep away from inheritance or property devolution a
DOUMANI: number of categories of people who otherwise would have inherited.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

BESHARA So--

DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: It's designating who is important to you and who isn't.

BESHARA And both Nablus and Tripoli had something in common. They focused relentlessly on the
DOUMANI: direct lineal descendants of the endower. What they differed really is in who among the
descendants would get property. Now, so what the book does is say that there are other
systematic differences between the two when it comes to understanding what family is. For
example, in Tripoli, 50% of waqf endowers were women, and Nablus is like 10%.

In Tripoli, the third of the waqf's female descendants were given equal shares to male
descendants, even though in Islamic inheritance laws, it's very clear that it's supposed to be
two to one in favor of the male for a variety of reasons. This never happened in Nablus. And
there are many, many other differences. And so a third puzzle presented itself, which is what
explains these differences.

INTERVIEWER: And?

BESHARA And so the book talks a lot about a range of reasons, but the most important, in my view, is the
DOUMANI: political economy of these two spaces really differed from each other.

INTERVIEWER: Talk a little bit about that. So there's-- the Tripoli was orchards, and the fortune was revenues
and rents.

BESHARA Right.

DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: And in Nablus, it was more house-based.

BESHARA The primary difference is that, in Tripoli, the core of the-- or the material base of most
DOUMANI: propertied individuals was their ownership of mulberry orchards, mulberry, the white mulberry,

because that's the only food that the silkworm eats. And so it was a big part of the silk-production industry. And citrus as well, which was used for export.

So these orchards were on privately-owned land, so there's a property difference here. Most of the land actually was already endowed as a waqf, but in Islamic law, they separate between the trees and the land. Land--

INTERVIEWER: Where they owned the trees but not the land, right?

BESHARA Right.

DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: So interesting. And in Nablus, they were maybe more money lending to the--

BESHARA Exactly.

DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: --peasants around?

BESHARA Exactly. So in Nablus, merchant households were-- and artisans were the base of the economy. And their entire livelihood depended on their ability to secure the surplus of the countryside, the cotton, the olive oil, et cetera, to make products like soap or textiles and to trade in these commodities.

DOUMANI:

And the only way they could access them, usually, was through a money-lending system called the salam system, which was a little bit like a forward-purchase contract. So you would say, I'll give you money now, and you deliver in kind later at a set price that we agree on now. And the difference in what the price might be in the future and what you set it now would be the interest or the profit.

Whereas the most common contract in Tripoli was a co-cultivation contract, that is to say, a contract in which a woman often would bring in a group of people who would plant the trees, nurse them into maturity, and do all that they need to do to make them productive, such as pruning or et cetera, dredging to water canals, or planting in between them, and so on. And at the end of their contract, usually 8 to 12 years, then they would get to own half the trees.

INTERVIEWER: That explains the difference in the relationship to the waqf, or their approach to drawing up a waqf.

BESHARA So the other major difference is that this connection between merchants and peasants in
DOUMANI: Nablus was a very male affair. Merchants went to the countryside. They participated in the weddings. They gave gifts. They brought the peasants back to the city. They helped them negotiate the city. They created alliances between specific merchant houses and the clusters of villages in the countryside over generations.

Women were not part of that entire exchange, whereas in Tripoli, women were very important in the silk industry and in managing the production of mulberry leaves and the orchards. And so they had much bigger economic clout in the key sector of the city.

INTERVIEWER: Which really does help explain why they figure prominently in the waqf--

BESHARA Yes--
DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: --as beneficiaries.

BESHARA That's right. And Nablus men brought their wives to a larger household to live along with the
DOUMANI: family of his brother or et cetera. And in Tripoli, often men went to live with their wives.

INTERVIEWER: Really? Oh, interesting.

BESHARA Yes.
DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: And we're almost out of time, but I wanted to ask you, you've said that Middle Eastern scholarship is built on assumptions that we don't even see.

BESHARA Yeah.
DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: And that we need to start building knowledge on actual historical studies. So is this a political act? As a historian, it feels to me like there's intention there--

BESHARA Mm-hmm.
DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: --very clear intention.

BESHARA This book is, in a way, an attempt to do two things. One is to challenge pervasive discourse on

DOUMANI: the three most important zones of knowledge reduction in Middle East studies, which is about Islam, women, and modernity. They all depend on these assumptions about the past. So it's a way to challenge conventional scholarship and public discourse on these issues. But it's also an attempt to build an alternative model for doing the history of the region that doesn't depend so much on this question of the encounter with the West, which was really the fundamental departure point for most studies.

INTERVIEWER: So then, instead, it's really like what was life really like.

BESHARA
DOUMANI: Yes. So that is-- it has to do with the choice of the period. Most studies of the Middle East begin in the second half of the 19th century and move forward because they believe that this is the rupture that gives us the Middle East as we know it today. So I do it in the earlier period.

Most focus on the big, cosmopolitan cities because they feel these are the contact points with the West, and therefore they are the nodes through which this change in the area happened. And I've choosed provincial regions.

And most studies focus on intellectual or political elites, the so-called notables. And this one really focuses on the average, property-holding individuals. And an important finding of this book is that the capitalist transformation of Nablus and Tripoli did not lead to a increasing similarity between the two. It led to increasing difference. Now, what really was-- happened here is that the more that Nablus was integrated into the world capitalist economy, the more competitive the relations between different merchant households, the more they excluded women.

INTERVIEWER: Interesting.

BESHARA
But in Tripoli--

DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: So capitalism didn't have this modernizing effect?

BESHARA
No, just the opposite.

DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm. That's so interesting.

BESHARA
Exclusion is a modern phenomenon. Whereas in Tripoli, the more it became involved in the

DOUMANI: silk industry and in the export of citrus, the more this sort of the size of the middle class and the egalitarian kind of political economy grew.

INTERVIEWER: Have you gotten any reactions to the book yet?

BESHARA Only from some fellow academics, but not-- it hasn't been out long enough to be reviewed.

DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: Well, it is eminently readable, and I highly recommend it. And I really thank you for coming into here today to talk to us about it.

BESHARA Thank you so much.

DOUMANI:

INTERVIEWER: Thanks, Beshara.

BESHARA Thank you for this opportunity.

DOUMANI:

[MUSIC PLAYING]

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