



AUB Press Hosts Historian Nadia El Cheikh at the 66th Beirut Arab International Book Fair: "Transformations of the Self and the Historian"

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Office of Communications, communications@aub.edu.lb

As part of its participation in the 66th Beirut Arab International Book Fair, the American University of Beirut (AUB) Press organized a discussion titled "Transformations of the Self and the Historian," featuring Professor Nadia El Cheikh, renowned historian, in conversation with Dr. Bilal Orfali, Sheikh Zayed Chair for Arabic and Islamic Studies at AUB. El Cheikh is a leading scholar of the Abbasid Caliphate and Byzantine history, and the author of numerous influential publications. The event was supported by the Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan Chair at AUB and organized in collaboration with the Center for Arts and Humanities at the university. It drew a diverse audience of established historians, university students, and history enthusiasts.

During the conversation, El Cheikh reflected on her personal journey into the discipline of history, which began in her youth, nurtured by a family passionate about literature and historical inquiry. She pursued her undergraduate studies in history at the American University of Beirut, where she was mentored by distinguished scholars such as Samir Seikaly, Kamal Salibi, Abdulrahim Abu-Husayn, and George Khairallah. She emphasized the importance of learning how to analyze primary sources and approach historical revisionism—the critical re-examination of established narratives.

El Cheikh went on to discuss her acceptance into Harvard University for graduate studies, where she was profoundly influenced by Angeliki E. Laiou, then chair of the History Department, whose teachings on Byzantine history marked a pivotal moment in El Cheikh's academic development. This experience inspired her to bridge the histories of the Byzantine Empire and the Abbasid Caliphate.

Dr. Orfali also discussed El Cheikh's return to Lebanon after completing her studies. In 1992, while teaching at Amherst College, she received a call from her former professor Kamal Salibi, urging her to come back and contribute to Lebanon's academic rebuilding in the post-civil war era. Despite the challenges of returning to a

country still in recovery, she accepted—and became the first woman to teach in AUB's History Department. She noted that a historian's geographic location deeply influences the kinds of questions they ask and the historical periods they choose to explore.

When asked about the sources used in her book, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs*, and the core of its thesis, El Cheikh explained that her research spanned both Abbasid and Byzantine histories. Her sources included the Qur'an, its various interpretations, Islamic oral histories, classical historical texts, literary works, and writings by medieval geographers. El Cheikh addressed the ongoing scholarly debate surrounding the topic. She noted the scarcity of research on Islam's role in Byzantium, which motivated her to explore and highlight relationships between the two civilizations that had previously been overlooked.

Her other book, *Women, Islam, and the Abbasid Identity*, discusses the period after the Abbasids took power in 750 CE, they used ideas about women to help define and legitimize their rule. As *jahl* (pre-Islamic ignorance) became linked to femininity, gendered metaphors shaped how the Abbasids viewed outsiders and internal threats. This process influenced both Muslim identity and perceptions of women in Islamic history.

Visit AUB Press on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHI2MbcCQbOaCv1XX5ZgN9g>) to watch the full discussion.