

## Rifa‘at ‘Ali Abou-El-Haj (1933-2022)

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Rifa‘at ‘Ali Abou-El-Haj was born in Jerusalem in 1933. He was enrolled in the British-run St. George School until 1947, when he and his family had to relocate to Egypt due to wartime conditions. There, he attended a missionary school until 1948. After the *Nakba* and the creation of Israel in 1948, he was a student at the Friends Boys School in Ramallah (then Jordan) until he graduated in 1952. He then moved to the United States, where he attended Washington and Lee University, from which he graduated in 1956. Rifa‘at received his doctorate from Princeton University in 1962. Although he had been accepted at both Harvard and Princeton, he chose Princeton because three of his mentors had been students there.

Rifa‘at taught at St. Lawrence University in New York, and then moved to California, where he researched and taught at Cal State Long Beach for over thirty years. While there, he lived in residence for a couple of years. He ate his meals in the dining hall with the resident students and his table was always full. The students he mentored and worked with loved and respected him. He was also the associate editor of the influential *History Teacher*, and organized reading groups of scholars and students to discuss their own research as well as the latest research of their colleagues. The late Donald Quataert wrote that these reading groups “became an important vehicle through which he developed his own thinking and powerfully altered the course of Middle Eastern/North African and Ottoman

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history writing.” Quataert recalled Rifa‘at’s “analytical rigor and his insistence on critical thinking, no matter the theme or the person.” He remarked that Rifa‘at’s commitment to History was “deep, abiding, continuing, and passionate. He persistently...insisted that we think critically and examine the premises, biases, and perspectives of the objects of our inquiry and, indeed, of ourselves. We need... to understand the past as a dynamic among historical actors who have agendas, interests they sought to defend and extend. The past is [for Rifa‘at] not to be discovered and presented but rather unraveled and analyzed.”<sup>1</sup> When Rifa‘at’s beloved wife, Barbara, joined the Art History Department at SUNY Binghamton, Rifa‘at visited Barbara and his young daughters on weekends until he finally made the permanent move to Binghamton, where he joined Quataert in training and mentoring a new generation of Ottomanists. He was also a visiting professor at Princeton University from 1996 to 1997, where he made a substantial impact on graduate students there (myself included).

When Rifa‘at came to the United States for his university work, he quickly became aware of racial and ethnic politics in the U.S. In a historical moment where nationalities were still being “sorted out,” he knew what it was like to be a “minority” and bore witness to the struggles of minoritized groups in the United States. His experience continued to make him sensitive to the topics he was researching. His most important contribution to the study of the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries is to remind his readers and students that the subject of their study is a polity not unlike any other. It was not oriental, it was not just Islamic, and it was not in decline; it was a polity, the complex socio-political dynamics of which must be taken seriously and studied comparatively with others.

Rifa‘at’s scholarship in the field inspired new generations of Ottomanists to rethink long-held and deeply engrained assumptions in Ottoman historiography, such as the “decline thesis.” In his first monograph, *The Rebellion of 1703 and the Structure of Ottoman Politics* (1984), he questioned the “given” that a weaker sultanate meant that the empire was in decline. His complex analysis of other imperial groups and their challenges to the sultan’s political authority instead demonstrated that—like in other European settings—the structure of political authority was in transition, but not necessarily in decline. Rifa‘at’s work on advice (*nasihat*) literature continued to develop his response to the decline thesis,

1 Donald Quataert, “Preface,” *Beyond Dominant Paradigms in Ottoman and Middle Eastern/ North African Studies: A Tribute to Rifa‘at Abou-El-Haj*, eds. Donald Quataert and Baki Tezcan (Istanbul: İSAM, 2010), 9-10.

by exposing writers of advice literature as parties who had a stake in politics, rather than as impartial observers, as previous scholars had read them. My own students found one piece he wrote on this to be an especially important reminder to read sources critically, no matter what the scholarly consensus to date had to say about them.<sup>2</sup> Rifa'at's second book, *Formation of the Modern State: Ottoman Empire Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*,<sup>3</sup> which is equally accessible to students, advanced his empirical work on this period with nuanced theoretical grounding to illustrate the ways in which the processes that unfolded during these "neglected centuries" were internal dynamics that we can identify as modern state-formation; thus, Ottoman modernity, he showed, was built from within the empire and not just as a series of borrowings from or reactions to Europe. Rifa'at loved historiography, and encouraged students to become aware of what theoretical assumptions were present (or lacking) in the works they read, and among the many articles he published over decades, quite a few were dedicated to Ottoman historiography.<sup>4</sup>

Rifa'at's contribution to the study of Ottoman history was profound and has left an indelible mark on the field. This is because his work (not just published, but especially conveyed in-person) has had such a deep and lasting impact on his students, who have internalized his mark on the historiography of the Ottoman and post-Ottoman past, and who have brought his research and his mentorship to fruition in their own works. Many of us honored Rifa'at at a conference held at SUNY Binghamton in 2010. The festschrift dedicated to him is a showcase of new thinking in Ottoman history inspired by his work.<sup>5</sup> Rifa'at's committed mentorship was recognized in 2017, when he received the Middle East Studies Association's Mentoring Award. Nearly two dozen former students—now

2 Rifa'at 'Ali Abou-El-Haj, "The Ottoman *nasihatname* as a discourse over 'morality,'" *Mélanges Professeur Robert Mantran*, ed. Abdeljelil Temimi (Zaghouan: Centre d'Études et de Recherches Ottomanes, Morisques, de Documentation et d'Information, 1988), 17-30.

3 Rifa'at 'Ali Abou-El-Haj, *Formation of the Modern State: The Ottoman Empire, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).

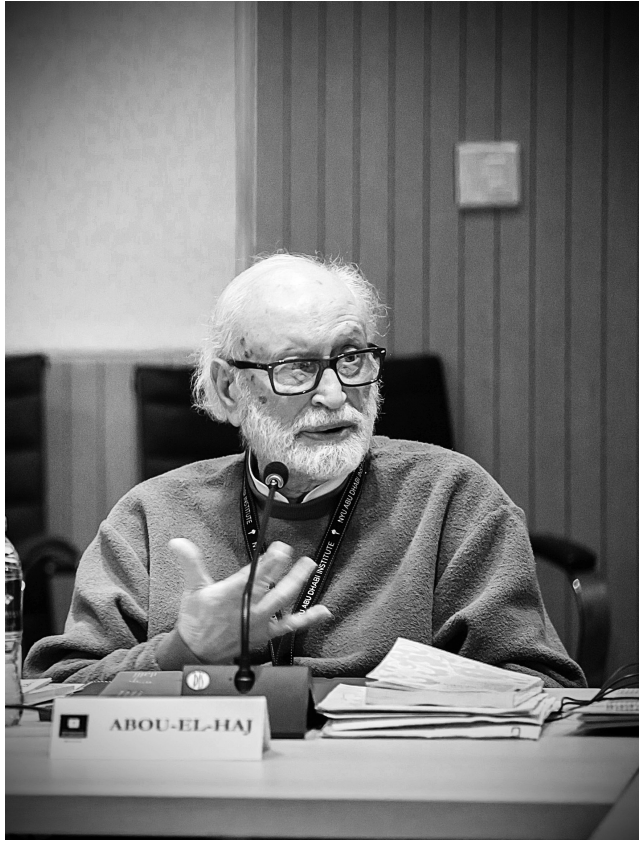
4 For a more detailed analysis of Rifa'at's many works, see Baki Tezcan, "In Memoriam: Rifa'at 'Ali Abou-El-Haj (1933-1922)," *Review of Middle Eastern Studies*, 55 (2022), 301-306.

5 Donald Quataert and Baki Tezcan, eds., *Beyond Dominant Paradigms in Ottoman and Middle Eastern/North African Studies: A Tribute to Rifa'at Abou-El-Haj* (Istanbul: İSAM, 2010) [first published by Osmanlı Araştırmaları / Journal of Ottoman Studies 36 (2010) as a special issue, accessible online: [http://www.isam.org.tr/index.cfm?fuseaction=objects2.detail\\_content&cid=623](http://www.isam.org.tr/index.cfm?fuseaction=objects2.detail_content&cid=623)].

established scholars—wrote letters in support of Rifa'at's nomination and detailed what his mentorship meant to them. David Gutman wrote, "His graduate seminars on primary sources and historiography have had a lasting impact on me. While crafting narratives and arguments from primary source evidence, I always remind myself to consider the context in which the sources were created, who authored them and for what purpose. His emphasis on the importance of closely reading even the most staid and prosaic of bureaucratic documents has helped me to become a more careful and diligent historian." Nilay Özok-Gündoğan observed, "What makes him a great mentor is that he values unrelenting pondering and questioning *with* his students, which opens up infinite possibilities for analytical depth and creativity." David and Nilay's sentiments were echoed in all of the many letters asking MESA to honor Rifa'at with this mentoring award, as he embodied—more than anyone most of us knew—the best of mentorship; he pushed us, sometimes to the point of frustration, but remained supportive of his students years (sometimes decades) after they had finished their degrees. Rifa'at's numerous beloved students have translated his academic and personal coaching into their own words in the form of articles and books, each of which carries some imprint of his mentoring, and have been inspired by his example to serve as dedicated mentors to their own students.

Rifa'at's sudden death on March 14, 2022 has left a void in the community of Ottoman historians, which will continue to be felt deeply by his many colleagues and students. May his work and his love for his students continue to inspire us all.

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