

**Reihe für Osnabrücker Islamstudien**

Band 38



Bacem Dziri / Merdan Güneş (Hrsg.)

Niedergangsthesen  
auf dem Prüfstand /  
Narratives of Decline Revisited



**PETER LANG**

**Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek**  
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation  
in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische  
Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

GEFÖRDERT VOM



Bundesministerium  
für Bildung  
und Forschung

Gefördert vom Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung

Umschlagabbildung: © Ali Ozgon / Shutterstock.com

ISSN 2190-3395  
ISBN 978-3-631-83346-9 (Print)  
E-ISBN 978-3-631-83905-8 (E-PDF)  
E-ISBN 978-3-631-83906-5 (EPUB)  
E-ISBN 978-3-631-83907-2 (MOBI)  
DOI 10.3726/b17739

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Recep Şentürk

## **The Decline of the Decline Paradigm: Revisiting the Periodisation of Islamic History**

### **1 Introduction**

Did the Islamic civilisation decline? If yes, then when did its decline begin? If not, then how can one explain the conflicts the Muslim world has been facing for the last two centuries? These giant questions continue to occupy the minds of scholars of Islamic Civilisational Studies worldwide and from all disciplines. There are numerous contested answers, and the conventional ones offered to these questions, once taken for granted, are no longer applicable. This article attempts to shed light on the Eurocentric historical periodisation process of the Islamic civilisation that has dominated the disciplines of history and social sciences, and the recent paradigm shift from declinist to anti-declinist paradigm that is challenging the orientalist narratives that have dictated how we perceive the Muslim world, how it has become and how it may be. The paradigm shift from declinist to anti-declinist among historians of Islam necessitates revisiting the existing periodisation of Islamic history commonly used today, and re-dividing it into periods in light of new research and data from primary sources. By doing so, we can redefine the propagated chosen time periods of the 'golden ages' and the 'dark ages' in Islamic history, and introduce a new narrative to the story of Muslims in the world.

There are many practical benefits in dividing history into periods. The question is how to do so? Generally, in the field of history and in social sciences, two visions compete with each other regarding historic periodisation: (1) the disunited or fragmented multiple up and down circular movements around the world; (2) the unidirectional united movement of humanity as a whole from the beginning of history to the 'end' of it. Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) and his followers advocate for the former periodisation, which is comparable to the life cycle of a living organism. According to Ibn Khaldūn, each society or civilisation continues to live in a circular movement travelling up and down, thereby giving rise to multiple circular movements in the world. He does not envision the movement of humanity as a whole in a unified and linear manner through stages of progress or decline. The latter approach to periodisation advocates a linear evolution or progress of humanity as a whole. It has been the most commonly

shared methodology of historical periodisation among the 19th century thinkers, historians and social scientists in the West. In modern historiography, it has been fashionable to divide history of civilisations into two periods based on two categories: rise and fall, progress or decline, along with some interim periods. Until recently, historians used to apply this dichotomy without critique. Nonetheless, the construction of a world history as a single unified and unidirectional process of progress is no longer tenable and an increasing number of calls have emerged to modify or replace it.

It is time to go beyond the dichotomy and binary opposition of progress and decline, or the rise and fall in the study of history of world civilisations. There are five precautions to the dangers of doing so. The first constitutes the using of huge macro categories of progress and decline in periodisation that leads to sweeping judgements and blinds the researchers to see what is really happening on the ground. Second, it forces researchers to construe the data to conform to this preconceived dichotomy in their minds. Third, using the labels of progress and decline reflects subjective value judgements, in comparison to what and according to whom. Fourth, it reflects ideological prejudices towards the other such as eurocentrism, racism, nationalism and religious puritanism or bigotry. Fifth, it involves imposing a particular periodisation of history on other people by disregarding the way they periodise their own history. The following account about the problems caused by application of the decline paradigm as applied to the Islamic civilisation supports this view.

Almost all modern Western and Muslim historians studied the history of Islamic civilisation from this binary perspective. In general, they divided Islamic history into two periods by labelling the period before al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) as the period of rise or the Golden Age and the period after him as the period of decline and Dark Age. In a similar fashion, historians of the Ottoman Empire divided the Ottoman history into two periods by calling, in general, the period before Kanuni Sultan Süleyman (r. 926–974/1520–1566) as the period of rise and the period after Kanuni as the period of decline.

However, there is a striking gap between the periodisation of the Islamic and the Ottoman history. Considering the early Ottoman history until the time of Kanuni Sultan Süleyman in the 16th century as the period of rise contradicts the assumption that the post-Ghazālī period is a period of decline. This gap reflects how disconnected the historians of Islam are from the historians of the Ottoman Empire, despite the fact that Ottoman history is a very significant part of the Islamic history. This gap may be due to the linguistic reason, since Ottoman history requires the mastering of classical Turkish. Yet, most historians of Islam know Arabic but not Turkish.

Despite so, since the 1980s, as I will demonstrate below, we increasingly witness signs of a paradigm shift in the disciplines of Islamic and Ottoman history as they address one another. There is a new trend in both the fields of Islamic and Ottoman history to extend the period of the rise of Islamic civilisation to later centuries by pushing the date of the beginning of decline to a later period. In particular, an increasing number of historians of Islam came to question labelling the later part of Islamic history, especially the late Ottoman period, as a decline, a decay or decadence. This paradigm shift is due to the newly discovered historical and archival data against which the conventional binary logic of the uniformed rise and fall could not stand any more.

In my view, we need to take the critique a step further by questioning whether the Islamic civilisation truly collapsed and fell by itself due to internal causes or not. This critical approach may allow us to go beyond the conventional sweeping generalisations about the fall of the Islamic civilisation. I will propose reconsidering *military defeat* of Muslims and the *colonisation* of their lands as an explanatory model instead of the conventional model that is based on the fall of the Islamic civilisation due to cultural decline. The fact that Huntington considers the Islamic civilisation a major force in world politics and in clash with the Western civilisation, indicates a powerful will to challenge the West and can be seen as a sign of the vitality of the Islamic civilisation to this day.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I will first discuss the hidden agendas behind the different ways of dividing history into periods using the example of periodisation of Western history derived from the work of Jacques Le Goff. Second, I will present three different methods of periodisation used by historians of Islam, namely the *'ulama'* centric, the state centric and the Eurocentric declinistic periodisation. Third, I will discuss the views of historians of Islam who challenged the conventional declinist paradigm such as Marshall Hodgson, Khaled El-Rouayheb, Ahmad Dallal and Peter Adamson among others. Fourth, I will briefly present the views of Ottoman historians who openly rejected the conventional declinist periodisation such as Cemal Kafadar, Linda Darling, Jane Hathaway, Caroline Finkel and Matthew Kelly. The rejection of the decline paradigm brings to mind the following question: If the Ottoman Empire did not decline then what happened? In conclusion, I will try to briefly draw attention to the alternative answers offered to this question.

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1 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York 2011.

## 2 Is Dividing History into Periods a Neutral Activity?

Periodisation is widely used today in our academic and public culture. It has great impact on our understanding of ourselves and other people in the world. Furthermore, it shapes our approach to, and relations with the other. Thus, its impact is not limited only to the conceptual domain regarding how we view others and ourselves, but also it has a deep impact on the moral and political domain – which is about how we see our role in the world and how we relate to others.

In his book, “Must We Divide History into Periods?”, Jacques Le Goff affirmatively answers this question stating that we need to organise time, in particular, while teaching history. If we agree on his term then the question is no longer about whether we need to divide history into periods or not, but it is about *how* to divide it into periods.

Le Goff draws our attention to the fact that dividing history into periods is not a neutral, objective and value-free activity as he affirms that

Periodization is not only a way of acting upon time. The very act itself draws our attention to the fact that there is nothing neutral, or innocent, about cutting time up into smaller parts.<sup>2</sup>

Periodisation may be a reflection of bias or it may be designed in such a way to serve a tacit ideological or political purpose:

If periodization is helpful in organizing time, or rather in putting it to use for one purpose or another, it sometimes gives rise to problems in making sense of the past. Periodizing history is a complicated business. Unavoidably, it is fraught with personal bias and shaped by an interest in arriving at a result that will be widely accepted.<sup>3</sup>

Periodisation is part of the history education offered to students from elementary to graduate academia, as history is a significant part of the curriculum in nation building. Consequently, it shapes the public imagination from childhood about the self and the other, about the past and the present, upon which moral judgements are based. Hence, Le Goff explains,

In the meantime, however, it will be necessary to examine an essential moment in the periodization of history: the transformation of historical writing, originally a narrative genre meant chiefly as a source of moral edification and guidance, into a branch

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2 Jacques Le Goff, *Must We Divide History into Periods?*, transl. Malcolm DeBevoise, New York 2015, p. 2.

3 Ibid., p. 4.



of knowledge, a professional discipline, and, crucially, a subject to be taught in schools and universities.<sup>4</sup>

A good example for the impact of periodisation on public imagination is the Renaissance period and the Middle Ages. The conventional periodisation of Western history that is based on a division between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. This is now increasingly questioned and revised in the light of new historical data. This brings to mind the question about what motivated historians to depict the Middle Ages as a dark period in Western history. Le Goff attempts to answer this question stating:

Dividing history into periods is never – I repeat, never – a neutral or innocent act. The changeable reputation of the Middle Ages over the past two hundred years proves my point. [...] Periodization, as the work of human minds, is at once artificial and provisional. In this respect its usefulness is twofold: it allows us to make better sense of the past, in the light of the most recent research, while at the same time reminding us of the imperfections of this instrument of knowledge we call history.<sup>5</sup>

The advocates of enlightenment and modernism depicted the Middle Ages as dark ages. This was due to their adversity of Christianity. We are now told by prominent historians that depicting the Middle Ages as such was a mere reflection of ideological bias of modernists against Christianity, which can no longer survive against newly discovered historical data. Therefore, it must be replaced by a positive image of the Middle Ages. Presently, the narrative about the Middle Ages in the West has already been changing towards a bright period in Western history. Le Goff further explains that as follows:

With the American historian Charles Homer Haskins (1870–1937) and his thesis of a twelfth century renaissance, and especially with the work of Marc Bloch (1886–1944) and the Annales School in France, the Middle Ages came to be seen as a creative epoch, a time of luminous splendor (first and foremost, it was the “age of the cathedrals”) but also of shadows and darkness.<sup>6</sup>

Constructing the Middle Ages as a dark age was also motivated by the idea of linear progress and social evolution. This is evident in the periodisation by Bergson, Marx, Comte and Durkheim among others. Each of these figures divided history into successive periods continuously moving towards a better and brighter period. The advocates of social evolution and progress reversed the Christian – and also traditional view by all religions – of history that saw the

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4 Ibid., p. 20.

5 Ibid., p. 17.

6 Ibid., p. 16.



golden age in the past during the time of the great masters of religion and placed the golden age in the future as the ultimate goal of the social evolution.

The narrative of Western progress needed a theory of decline to hold itself superior in contradiction to the decline of the Muslim world and the East in general. According to this narrative, the more the West progressed the more the East declined. Muslims and all non-Western nations appropriated the narrative of decline as an objective history. Education was used in non-Western states to indoctrinate their nations, particularly their youth, into such decline narrative. The contrast between the shining Middle Ages of Islam and the dark Middle Ages of the West was reversed: the new age was dark for Islam and shining for the West.

In this conjecture, orientalist constructed Islam as an Oriental civilisation and Muslims as Oriental people. This was impossible to achieve without falling into inconsistency, because history of religions has always categorised Islam as a Western or Abrahamic religion along with Judaism and Christianity, based on the common theological, geographical and historical features. Islam, similar to Judaism and Christianity, originated in the Middle East and accepted the existence of an external god, and saw Prophet Abraham as the grandfather. Islam has been presented as an Abrahamic Western religion, but Islamic civilisation has been portrayed as an Eastern civilisation. This reflects a clear inconsistency.

This periodisation of the continuously evolving and rising West and declining East, which was first constructed by Eurocentric and white-supremacist thinkers as a tool for othering and exclusion, was exported to the non-Western lands in Asia and Africa. Strangely enough, it came to be internalised by Muslims and other non-Western intellectuals without critical scrutiny. The educational system of non-Western and Muslim countries taught this periodisation based on Western supremacy and non-Western inferiority as part of their official curriculums in their schools and contributed to its dissemination as if it was a scientific fact.

### **3 How Did Muslims Periodise Their Own History in the Classical Period?**

Muslim historians developed a methodology to divide history into periods and continued using it until the second half of the 19th century. The periodisation that emerged in the modern West and was accepted by Muslim intellectuals, replaced the traditional way Muslims divided history into periods. It is important to have a brief look at how Muslim historians divided their history into periods with the purpose of identifying the paradigm shift in the Muslim

periodisation of history. This will demonstrate that we can divide Muslim historiography into three periods: (1) Classical period until the second half of the 19th century, (2) Declinism from the second half of the 19th century until the 1980s; and (3) Revision of declinism and search for a new periodisation from the 1980s until today.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.1 *Tabaqāt: 'Ulamā'* Centric Classical Periodisation through Generations of Scholars

Before declinism prevailed in the Muslim world, some of the Muslim historians used to periodise their own history according to the generations of the '*ulamā*'. The chain begins with the *ṣaḥāba* or *aṣḥāb* (companions), then the *tābi'ūn* and the *atbā' al-tābi'īn*. This diachronic network of scholars over generations continues successively to this day, but historians no longer use it as a concept in their periodisation of Islamic history. Muslim historians used to use a social network approach in determining the layers or generations of '*ulamā*' (*tabaqāt al-'ulamā*'), but not chronologically or periodically marked calendar years. For instance, the *ṣaḥāba* consist of people who personally met Prophet Muḥammad in his lifetime and believed in him. This relationship categorises a person as a member of the generation of the *ṣaḥāba*, and not merely living in the same period. The period of the *ṣaḥāba* lasted until the last of the *ṣaḥāba* passed away. The next period, the period of the *tābi'ūn* or the successors began during the period of the *ṣaḥāba*, and ran for a period parallel to it but continued after it ended. Likewise, the period of the *atbā' al-tābi'īn* or the successors of the successors commenced while the generation of the *ṣaḥāba* and the *tābi'ūn* were alive by the rise of the people who were connected only to the *tābi'ūn* but not to the *ṣaḥāba*.

This demonstrates that the periodisation by Muslim historians reflects the following five characteristics. First, periods are marked by the rise and demise of generations of scholars. Second, the position of the scholars in the periodisation is determined by their position in their social network, i. e. whom they knew from previous generations. Third, periods run parallel or simultaneously to each other for a time period, rather than one beginning exactly after the other ends. Fourth, it puts human beings and their relationships at the centre, but not the states or other institutions and processes.

According to this method of periodisation, at a given time, usually four (rarely maximum five) periods or layers of '*ulamā*' coexisted. The rise of a new layer

7 Cemal Kafadar, "The Question of Ottoman Decline", in: *Harvard Middle East and Islamic Review* 4/1–2 (1997–98), pp. 30–75.

coincides with the demise of an older layer, usually four previous generations. Among countless others, al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505)<sup>8</sup> used this method in their books, which I also incorporate in my book “Narrative Social Structure”, in which I state that

The life spans of generations overlap and are indeterminate, that is to say its longevity changes from generation to generation [see table 1]. The death of the last scholar from a layer marks that layer's end. The era of the *Ashab* (layer 1) ended in 110 AH/728 CE. That of the Successors (layers 2–4) in 180 AH/796 CE. That of the Successors of Successors

**Table 1:** Classical Periodisation of Islamic History according to Generations of ‘*Ulama*’

| Tabaqa no.<br>(generation) | Beginning<br>(hijra calendar) | Duration<br>(total number<br>of years) | End<br>(hijra calendar) | Name of the<br>tabaqa   |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1                          | 1                             | 90                                     | 90                      | <i>ṣaḥāba</i>           |
| 2                          | 14                            | 91                                     | 105                     | <i>tābi'un</i>          |
| 3                          | 34                            | 83                                     | 117                     | <i>atbā' al-tabi'in</i> |
| 4                          | 46                            | 105                                    | 151                     |                         |
| 5                          | 70                            | 110                                    | 180                     |                         |
| 6                          | 100                           | 106                                    | 206                     |                         |
| 7                          | 106                           | 124                                    | 230                     |                         |
| 8                          | 139                           | 125                                    | 264                     |                         |
| 9                          | 170                           | 122                                    | 292                     |                         |
| 10                         | 180                           | 138                                    | 318                     |                         |
| 11                         | 218                           | 130                                    | 348                     |                         |
| 12                         | 250                           | 138                                    | 388                     |                         |
| 13                         | 291                           | 150                                    | 441                     |                         |
| 14                         | 361                           | 125                                    | 486                     |                         |
| 15                         | 404                           | 136                                    | 540                     |                         |
| 16                         | 463                           | 118                                    | 581                     |                         |
| 17                         | 494                           | 125                                    | 619                     |                         |
| 18                         | 546                           | 116                                    | 662                     |                         |
| 19                         | 580                           | 100                                    | 680                     |                         |
| 20                         | 592                           | 116                                    | 708                     |                         |
| 21                         | 624                           | 118                                    | 742                     |                         |

8 Muḥammad al-Dhahabī, *Kitāb Tadhkirat al-ḥuffāz*, Hyderabad, Indien: Osmania Oriental Publications Bureau 1968; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tabaqāt al-ḥuffāz*, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya 1984.

(layers 5–7) in 220 AH/835 CE. That of the Successors of Successors of Successors (layers 8–10) in 260, and finally that of the Successors of Successors of Successor of Successors in 300 AH/912 CE.<sup>9</sup>

The *aṣḥāb* lived between 10 BH and 110 AH (613 and 728 AD). The longevity of their generation was 120 years. The *tābi'ūn* lived between 12 and 180 AH (633 and 796 AD). The longevity of their generation was 168 years. Their successors (*atbā' al-tābi'in*) lived between 110 and 220 AH (728 and 835 AD) with a longevity of 110 years. Their successors lived between 180 and 260 AH (796 and 874 AD) for 80 years; and then their next successors lived between 220 and 300 AH (835 and 912 AD) for 80 years.<sup>10</sup>

Table 1 demonstrates the beginning and the end dates of 21 generations (*ṭabaqāt*) based on the data collected from the biographical dictionary of al-Dhahabī on the *ḥuffāz*, the top *ḥadīth* scholars over 21 generations. It also demonstrates that the lifetime of the generations overlap to a certain extent. That means several generations coexist at a given time although their longevity varies from generation to generation.

### 3.2 *Al-Atwār al-Khamsa*: State Centric Periodisation of Ibn Khaldūn and its Critics

Nonetheless, the periodisation based on the lifetime of the generations of *'ulamā'* changed when modern historiography was applied to the periodisation of Islamic history. Then came periods based on the states such as the Umayyad period, the Abbasid period, and the Ottoman period. Yet this was not completely foreign to Muslim historians. Ibn Khaldūn is the most prominent Muslim historian who periodised history based on the life cycles of states. Ibn Khaldūn shares with modern historians the act of replacing the *'ulamā'* with the state as the centre of history. Albeit so, he disagrees with them with respect to continuous declinism or evolutionism, because his view is cyclical, comparable to the life cycles of a living organism. Due to this similarity, orientalist such as Bernard Lewis used – or actually misused – Ibn Khaldūn and his followers to justify their views regarding declinism.

As to the comparison between the first and the second method of periodisation, in my opinion there are three differences. First, *ṭabaqāt* literature divides history into periods based on the longevity of the generations of scholars while the state

9 Recep Şentürk, *Narrative Social Structure: Anatomy of the Hadith Transmission Network*, 610–1505, Stanford 2005, pp. 40 f.

10 Ibid., p. 41.

centric view divides history into periods according to the longevity of the ruling dynasty or the state or both. Second, the former puts the '*ulama*' at the centre of history and politics at the periphery, while the latter reverses this view by putting the state at the centre and the '*ulama*' at the periphery. Third, the defining criterion used in determining the periods is the intellectual networks for the former, while it is the institution of the state for the latter.

Modern historians have also shared with Ibn Khaldūn the method of putting the state at the centre and dividing the history according to the rise, demise or the changes of the state. Nonetheless, there is a major difference between Ibn Khaldūn and modern historians. Ibn Khaldūn adopted a circular periodisation based on the five stages (*al-atwār al-khamsa*) of the state life while modern historians adopted a linear periodisation based on continuous progress or decline.

Ibn Khaldūn identifies the life cycle of dynasties and the states they rule. He identifies five stages in the life of a state that is ruled by a dynasty. Given that the stages in the life of a state are similar to the life cycle of organisms, the first stage begins with birth. Birth is the strongest stage as it contains a strongly intact '*aşabiyya*' (unity and solidarity) within the small tribal group of state builders. Consequently, youth follows as the stage of energetic solidification of state power. The following third stage is maturity. The state develops and matures in its political establishment through accumulation of wealth and this stage marks the beginning of the weakening of '*aşabiyya*' due to political rivalry, excessive consumption, moral erosion and financial greed. The fourth stage is aging where the state's social structure faces disintegration of unity and a rise of individualism. Finally, demise and erosion becomes the last stage of the state's life cycle as it loses power to internal corruption and foreign invasion of another tribal group with a different '*aşabiyya*'.<sup>11</sup>

The five-stages model of Ibn Khaldūn is a circular one because demise of a group leads to the birth of another group: The emerging group in the periphery replaces the demising one in the centre after a conflict between the two. Ibn Khaldūn's model is a nuanced one because it identifies several realms and follows them up as parallel processes. In particular, he pays attention to social psychology, culture, economy, political and military power. He observes that, paradoxically, development in one domain may undermine another domain. For instance, increasing wealth due to the economic development and rising refinement of culture eventually weaken the group solidarity and consequently the military power.

11 Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, 5 vols., ed. 'Abd al-Salam al-Shaddādī, Casablanca: Bayt al-Funūn wa-l-'Ulūm wa-l-Ādāb 2005, vol. 2.

I call this the 'Khalidūnian paradox' which eventually leads to the 'circulation of civilisations':

Ibn Khaldun's discipline of *'Umrān* is founded on a paradox. According to him, civilisations begin to collapse not as a result of their backwardness, but after they have reached the apex of progress. Consequently, as argued above, the Islamic civilisation and its last great representative the Ottomans collapsed after becoming prosperous par excellence. Once the Western civilisation procures the greatest frontiers of its development, so will it begin its downfall. Paradoxically, the warrior spirit and ability of self-defence dwindle in civilisations whose opulence increases. Hence, supreme triumph is tantamount to the end of a civilisation.<sup>12</sup>

Ibn Khaldūn's approach stands out among other theories of progress or social change by differentiating the different domains of society. Rather than addressing society as a whole, he addresses its domains such as its military, its economy, its moral values etc. individually. From Ibn Khaldūn's perspective, each social domain should be studied separately and with respect to its interaction with other domains. Following the changes in each stage and each domain demonstrates the contradictions between the decline and fall in different domains, and how progress in one domain may undermine progress in another, and vice versa. Ali Nizamuddin and I once explained that according to Ibn Khaldūn the history of civilisations is

replete with paradoxes and ironies, perhaps the most pivotal of which is the transformation of the perfection of civilisations leading to demise [...]. This may also be called the 'continuous cycle of civilisations' or the 'continual transformation of civilisations'. The continuous cycle of civilisations aspiring toward global ascendancy and the subsequent fall, Ibn Khaldun believes, is inescapable. Circulation of civilisations, according to Ibn Khaldun, is a historical canon impervious to defiance or alteration by the human will.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, Ibn Khaldūn's views, which are shared by some other great thinkers as well, contradict the orientalist notion of civilisational backwardness as a primary cause of civilisational decay and decline. Rather, he insists, like many others, that civilisations are a body with a soul that is born and ultimately dies, attributing a natural pattern of civilisational birth with glory and left legacies until they naturally take their time and die out. Accordingly, the cycle continues as another civilisation takes over.

12 Ali Nizamuddin/Recep Şentürk, "The Sociology of Civilisations: Ibn Khaldun and a Multi-Civilisational World Order", in: *Asian Journal of Social Science* 36/3–4 (2008), p. 544.

13 Ibid, pp. 544 f.

### 3.2.1 *Barbara Stowasser's Interpretation of Ibn Khaldūn: An Everlasting Golden Age is Possible*

Was Ibn Khaldūn a determinist positivist in particular with respect to the phases in the life of the state? Barbara Stowasser disagrees with those who argue that Ibn Khaldūn is the founder of positivism in social sciences as she writes:

While I concur with those voices that emphasize Ibn Khaldun's importance and originality, I cannot, however, agree with those that describe him as a positivist or even a true pragmatist in the contemporary sense.<sup>14</sup>

Stowasser thinks Ibn Khaldūn's worldview was not a secular one and thus, he did not develop a secular philosophy of history or political science, nor did he want to do it because it would contradict his Islamic worldview. Instead, Stowasser argues, Ibn Khaldūn was a follower of Islamic mainstream orthodox political philosophy:

Thus, I contend that Ibn Khaldun did not develop, nor did he seek to develop, a truly secular philosophy of history or a truly secular science of politics and society. Lately it has been fashionable to claim that he did. Yet just as Ibn Khaldun never recognized the idea of government as an autonomous secular activity so also did he not develop the idea of the state as independent from religion that derives its legitimacy from other sources and is fit to make its own morality. To my mind, therefore, Ibn Khaldun remained essentially and devoutly within the mainstream of orthodox Islamic political philosophy, and his philosophy of history reflects his conviction that while it is necessary to know the exact nature of man and society, both social and political, such knowledge is not possible "without knowing the true end of man and society."<sup>15</sup>

Stowasser argues that in Ibn Khaldūn's worldview religion and politics were not separated from each other as they have been in the modern West. Thus, Ibn Khaldūn did not see any dichotomy between religion and politics:

The notion of division and separation of religion and politics, which has gained ground in the West to a point where, in most peoples' opinion, political developments is "inversely [*sic*] related to religion in politics" – this notion has its roots in Western thought or, more specifically, in the Western Renaissance. Whether, of course, it has meant pure blessing or pure harm or something in between for our own civilization is another matter. But the ideal itself was not formulated by Ibn Khaldun, who is classical Islam's seemingly most pragmatic, seemingly most secular thinker.<sup>16</sup>

14 Barbara Stowasser, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History: The Rise and Fall of States and Civilizations*, Ankara 1984, p. 185.

15 Ibid., p. 190.

16 Ibid.



After examining the five stages in the life of societies, states, dynasties and civilisations, Ibn Khaldūn maintains, as Stowasser emphatically states, that it is not necessary for every social organism to go through these stages if people adhere to the true religion, Islam:

Underneath his pragmatism, Ibn Khaldun lets us perceive his deeper conviction: the conviction that adherence to the true religion can and should insure the creation of God's Kingdom on Earth, an everlasting Golden Age. If and when this is achieved, he tells us, civilizations need not and will not rise nor fall again.<sup>17</sup>

Stowasser makes it clear that Ibn Khaldūn was not a determinist regarding the lifespan of a state and its phases. Nevertheless, Stowasser does not address the question of how adherence to the true religion can insure an everlasting golden age for a state or society. In my view, this is because Islamic ethics of consumption provides an immunisation system to society against the maladies that accumulating wealth may cause.

Thus, for instance, the six centuries long lifetime of the Ottoman Empire, instead of five generations, may be seen as an accurate representation for what Stowasser argues for as a true understanding of Ibn Khaldūn's theory of five stages. From this perspective, limited consumption and abstention, as required by the divine law of Islam, may slow down the march of history and extend the longevity of the state. This is how the Ottomans interpreted and applied Ibn Khaldūn.

### 3.2.2 Marshall Hodgson's *Critique of Ibn Khaldūn: "A Civilization is Not an Organism"*

How realistic is Ibn Khaldūn's comparison of the life cycle of a state with the life cycle of a living organism? Marshall Hodgson rejects Ibn Khaldūn's five stages based on a comparison between the lives of an organism and a state and a civilisation as he argues that "a civilization is not an organism" and thus, biological laws cannot apply to civilisations. Therefore, he rejects the cyclical biological periodisation applied to civilisations and empires. Instead, Hodgson claims that changing circumstances cause the fall of the state if the state cannot adapt to the new circumstances accompanied by different opportunities and challenges:

The fate of the Islamicate civilization is not, then, an example of a biological law that every organism must flourish and then decay; for a civilization is not an organism. If anything, that fate exemplifies, rather, an economic principle that a successful institution

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

may invest so heavily in one kind of excellence, adapted to one kind of opportunity, that it will be ruined when new circumstances bring other sorts of opportunity to the fore – perhaps as a result, in part, of the very excellence with which the first opportunity was exploited.<sup>18</sup>

Hodgson's focus is more concerned with the economic adaptability of civilisations to changing circumstances, rather than the five stages derived from the life cycle of an organism. It occurs to me that with the purpose of rejecting the decline paradigm, Hodgson criticises Ibn Khaldūn's approach because it was commonly used, or misused, to justify that paradigm.

Before ending our discussion of Ibn Khaldūn's state centric periodisation of history, I would like to draw attention to its changing interpretations and usages. The advocates of the decline and even demise of the Islamic civilisation relied on a misinterpretation of Ibn Khaldūn's theory of the five stages. Therefore, the views of Stowasser and Hodgson come as important warnings not to take Ibn Khaldūn's theory at face value or as a deterministic approach to history. The demise is inevitable for a living organism in a limited time but this may not be true for a civilisation. Consequently, as Stowasser points out clearly, Ibn Khaldūn's theory of five stages should be seen as a warning rather than a deterministic prediction. It is a warning about being awake against the negative or corruptive impact of increasing wealth and power on social bonds, morality and resilience of society against outside attacks. Otherwise, the increasing economic and political power may *unintendedly* result in undermining the whole system and cause its collapse. This is how Ottomans interpreted Ibn Khaldūn and implemented his views in their system by staying away from extravagance and luxury. They did so, as Stowasser puts it nicely, by "adherence to the true religion" to "insure the creation of God's Kingdom on Earth, an everlasting Golden Age".<sup>19</sup> Ottomans called this ideal 'an eternal state' (*devlet-i ebed müddet*).

### 3.3 The Eurocentric Declinist Periodisation

As a result of the Westernisation of historiography in the Muslim world, the linear idea of periodisation replaced the circular periodisation of Ibn Khaldūn and also the classical periodisation based on layers of scholars. The narrative of progress emerged in Modern Europe parallel to the idea of social evolution. Intellectuals, social scientists and historians remained under the spell of this idea

18 Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*, ed. Edmund Burke, Cambridge 1993, p. 125.

19 Stowasser, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History*, p. 190.

for a long period until World War II. The destruction caused by World War II can be seen as a turning point for the rise of serious doubts towards progress. Yet the idea of progress still remains as an enchanting myth in the minds of masses and intellectuals.

The idea of the linear periodisation of History – with a capital H – of humanity or the history of human civilisation emerged in modern Europe and spread to the whole world. It is based on the idea of continuous and unidirectional progress and evolution. Some even claim that history has a goal to reach the last destination which marks the ‘end of history’.<sup>20</sup> They personify history and grant it an omnipotent power to determine everything in society all over the world.

From this perspective, Europe has always progressed but the East, including the Muslim world, has always declined. Dates marking the beginning of decline, and the causes of that decline, vary from thinker to thinker. Albeit so, the religion of Islam in general and religious fanaticism in particular has been blamed for the most part as the most important cause of decline. What I want to emphasise here is that, both Muslim intellectuals and masses amazingly accepted and internalised the narrative of decline, that was first produced by orientalists, during the Westernisation period of the second half of the 19th century. The decline paradigm prevailed in the literature and discourse without questioning until critics emerged during the last few decades whom I will further explore below. It is important for me to point out that I have no claim to be exhaustive; there is rich literature available on the causes of decline, but I will only refer to a few examples whom I consider vocal critics of declinism from various disciplines and geographical locations.

#### 4 Critics of the Islamic Decline Paradigm

The decline of the Islamic civilisation has remained, until recently, as an incontestable dogma. Nevertheless, there is a very strong current of criticism and rejection of this unquestioned construction. My selection of the following scholars, from different disciplines and backgrounds, aims to demonstrate the increasing rejection of declinism among the specialists of Islam.

I argue that one major cause of the increasing critiques against conventional declinism is the increasing dialogue between the historians of Islam and the historians of the Ottoman Empire. Declinist historians of Islam have divided Islamic history into two major periods of rise and decline. So did the declinist

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20 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York 1992.

historians of the Ottoman Empire who divided Ottoman history into periods of rise and fall. Yet there has been a striking gap between these two groups of historians and their periodisation. For the first group, in general, the decline of the Islamic civilisation begins after al-Ghazālī's period while for the latter group the decline of the Ottoman Empire begins after the Kanuni period. Historians of the Ottoman Empire generally accept that until the Kanuni period Ottomans were in rise. If we accept that, then we need to revise the periodisation of the declinist historians of Islam and expand the period of rise until the Kanuni period. Islamic history is much broader than that of the Ottoman Empire and it is a crucial part of the post-classical period that is no longer possible for historians of Islam to ignore. Therefore, in my view, the integration of Ottoman history into Islamic history is one of the major reasons why historians of Islam started questioning and criticising the long-standing declinist periodisation. This is explicitly demonstrated by the references to Ottoman history along with Safavid and Mughal history in the anti-declinist accounts I will present below.

Below, I will briefly survey the arguments of some of the scholars who are against the post-Ghazālī intellectual decline narrative in the Muslim world. I will construct a complete picture by successively presenting the views of historians of Islam who effectively demonstrated that their arguments falsify the decline paradigm in the centuries their research focused on. We observe the rejection of the declinist paradigm for the 16th century through the work of Hodgson; for the 17th century through the work of El-Rouayheb; for the 18th century through the work of Dallal; and finally for the 19th century through the work of Adamson.

I will first present Hodgson who is credited for pioneering the critical analysis of the declinist paradigm and rejecting it. He argues that the 16th century represents the peak of the power of Muslims rather than their decline. His work was complimented by El-Rouayheb who convincingly argued that the 17th century was not a century of decline, instead there was a very dynamic intellectual life and exchange in the Muslim world. By this El-Rouayheb pushed the beginning of the period of decline a century further to the 18th century. Next, the work of Dallal pushed the beginning of the decline even to a later date by demonstrating that the 18th century was intellectually a highly dynamic century prior to the European influence. Adamson took the beginning of the date of stagnation even further up until the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century with the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

The works of Hodgson on the 16th century, El-Rouayheb on the 17th century, Dallal on the 18th century, and Adamson on the post-classical period up until the 19th century, taken together, demonstrate that new data and research force the historians of Islam to postpone the beginning of the decline and stagnation

further and further in the light of new findings. These scholars argue that in the light of their accounts based on research and data the narrative of decline is no longer sustainable.

As I have mentioned above, those who reject the decline narrative are not limited only to these scholars. Below, I will also draw attention to the work of Jamil Ragep, a historian of Islamic astronomy, because historians of astronomy in the Muslim world should be credited for making a significant contribution to the rejection of the declinist paradigm by documenting the achievements of Muslim astronomers in their field.

Another critic I would like to discuss below is David C. Lindberg. Lindberg's work provides further insight into the paradigm shift in the field of history of science. The first edition of his book "The Beginnings of Western Science" reflect the decline narrative of science in the Muslim world, but he later abandoned this argument in the second edition of that book.

#### 4.1 Marshall Hodgson's Critique of the 16th Century Decline Paradigm

The most important and influential historian of Islam who called for revising the old declinist periodisation is Marshall G. S. Hodgson. In his introduction to Hodgson's book titled "Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History" Edmund Burke draws attention to this contribution of Hodgson:

First, although conventional scholarship emphasized that after A. D. 945 Islamic societies entered into a long period of decline from which they allegedly emerged only in the nineteenth century, Hodgson noted that the most celebrated cultural, scientific, and artistic figures of Islamic civilization (including among others, Ibn Sina, al-Ghazali, al-Biruni, and al-Firdawsi) lived after this date, and that this alone would call for a searching reevaluation. Hodgson's emphasis on the Middle Periods enabled him to argue that Arabic was not the only Islamic language of culture. Rather, from A. D. 945 Persian and Turkish played major roles in the elaboration of a cosmopolitan Islamic culture. It is this which provides a key to grasping the hemisphere-wide role of Islam in China, India, South and Southeast Asia, as well as the Balkans and the Maghrib. The Middle Periods were times of the greatest advances of Islamic civilization. Thus Hodgson's reexamination of the traditional periodization led to a remarkably fruitful reinvention of how Islamic civilization might be conceived, this time not as a truncated version of Europe, but in a world historical context and on its own terms.<sup>21</sup>

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21 Hodgson, *Rethinking World History*, p. xvii.

The decline period is based on two constructions: the Golden Age up until the 10th century, and decline from the 10th up until the 19th century. The 19th century is constructed as a period of revival (*nahda*) through modernisation and Westernisation, which in essence is nothing but political and cultural colonisation. Ironically, Hodgson notes, since the 19th century Muslims themselves have also internalised this periodisation, which presents the history of Islam after the 10th century as an highly extended period of decline. The Westerners have encouraged that the Muslims see a major part of their past as a period of successive failures. Hodgson notes that as follows:

Another source of misconceptions has been the tendency of Muslims themselves, since the nineteenth century, to reject the immediate past as a failure and look to certain earlier 'classical' strands in their heritage that seem to offer resources against modern Western encroachments; a tendency that Westerners have often encouraged for their own reasons. Thus, Western scholars discuss cultural decline in Islam, attempting to pinpoint the time and manner of decadence in the arts, religion, philosophy, and science, without really proving that such decadence really existed, and without evaluating the great works of later periods; the criteria for such cursory evaluation as is made tend to be very subjective. The aesthetic and philosophic criteria used are now being challenged in the light of recent Western changes in taste.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast to the common belief in his time, Hodgson argues that the Islamic civilisation was at the peak of its power at the end of the 16th century. Western colonisation, by the beginning of the 19th century, destroyed Muslim empires such as the Safavid Empire in Iran, the Timurid Empire in India and the Ottoman Empire. The internal weakness of these empires invited Western intervention that they could not resist. Likewise, the Chinese Empire faced a similar end. Hodgson confirms:

In the sixteenth century, the Muslim peoples, taken collectively, were at the peak of their power, by the end of the eighteenth century they were prostrate. The Safavi empire and even the Timuri empire of India were practically destroyed, and the Ottoman empire was desperately weakened; and such weaknesses could no longer be compensated by internal developments at the old pace, but invited Occidental intervention – which occurred massively, directly and indirectly, by the beginning of the nineteenth century. If it was any consolation, even the unparalleled power, wealth, and culture of the Chinese were subjected to the same fate.<sup>23</sup>

We can see that Hodgson's account is a nuanced one. He attributes the fall of the Islamic empires, and thus their civilisation, to their *military defeat* against

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22 Ibid., pp. 102 f.

23 Ibid., p. 125.

massive, direct or indirect, Occidental military intervention, rather than cultural decline. What he calls the Occidental intervention commenced by the beginning of the 19th century and resulted in the colonisation of the Muslim world. Strikingly though, this 19th century period is what some orientalists along with their Muslim sympathisers call the period of revival (*nahḍa*).

#### 4.2 Khaled El-Rouayheb's Critique of the 17th Century Decline Paradigm

Thanks to Hodgson, the perception of the 16th century as a century of decline has changed and the date of the beginning of decline was marked as the 17th century. Nonetheless, Khaled El-Rouayheb opposes the idea that from the 17th century onwards there was an intellectual decline in Islamic civilisation. In his article, "The Myth of 'The Triumph of Fanaticism' in the Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Empire", El-Rouayheb heavily criticised Halil İnalcık who used the term in his book "The Ottoman Empire".<sup>24</sup> İnalcık's writing reflects the view of the official historiography of the Turkish Republic during that period which was based on the decline paradigm with the purpose of discrediting the achievements of the Ottomans to add more legitimacy to the newly founded state. İnalcık's approach also reflects the commonly accepted view of historians of Islam in the Muslim world and the West (İnalcık himself, as I will demonstrate below, distanced himself from the declinist view during the later period of his life).

El-Rouayheb authored a book in 2015 dedicated to the critique of the declinist paradigm, "Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb". This book demonstrates that both in the Ottoman Empire and Morocco there was a very vibrant intellectual life. He bases his argument on the primary sources written by the scholars from these two countries. In this book, El-Rouayheb argues against the orientalists, the Ottomanists, Islamists and Arab nationalists who see the 17th century as a century of decline and intellectual darkness. By examining the primary texts from that period with a broad perspective and without restricting himself only to theology and law, El-Rouayheb demonstrates the vibrant intellectual life and exchange in the Muslim world. In his introduction, he says:

Dominant narratives of Islamic intellectual history have tended to be unkind to the seventeenth century in the Ottoman Empire and North Africa. Three independent narratives of "decline" – an Ottomanist, an Arabist, and an Islamist – have converged

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<sup>24</sup> Khaled El-Rouayheb, "The Myth of 'The Triumph of Fanaticism' in the Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Empire", in: *Die Welt des Islams* 48/2 (2008), pp. 196–221.



on deprecating the period as either a sad epilogue to an earlier Ottoman florescence or a dark backdrop to the later Arab “renaissance” and Islamic “revival.” Until recently, Ottomanists typically located the heyday of Ottoman cultural and intellectual achievement in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. After the death of Süleyman the Magnificent in 1566, the Empire was supposed to have entered a period of long decline that affected both its political military fortunes and its cultural-intellectual output. Scholars of Arabic literature and thought were inclined to view the seventeenth century as yet another bleak chapter of cultural, intellectual, and societal “decadence” (*inhitaf*) that began with the sacking of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 and came to an end only with the “Arab awakening” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Historians who study self-styled Islamic “reformist” and “revivalist” movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have often portrayed the immediately preceding centuries as marked by unthinking scholarly “imitation” (*taqlid*), crude Sufi pantheism, and “syncretic” and idolatrous popular religious practices.<sup>25</sup>

El-Rouayheb observes an emerging paradigm shift in the field of Islamic history, because of academic research on the intellectual production during the 17th century. He emphasises that,

such assessments are no longer accepted unquestioningly in academic circles. But their influence is still felt in the woefully underdeveloped state of research into the intellectual history of the seventeenth century in the Ottoman Empire and North Africa. The tide is turning, though, and recent years have seen a number of valuable monographs, doctoral dissertations, and editions of scholarly works.<sup>26</sup>

We can see El-Rouayheb’s work as a representative of the newly emerging academic discussions around the decline paradigm. They challenge and modify the conventional view that the 17th century was a century of decline and built a new vision that it was an intellectually dynamic and vibrant century.

### 4.3 Ahmad Dallal’s Critique of the 18th Century Decline Paradigm

Ahmad S. Dallal comments on the contribution of his book as follows: “This study will undermine the decline thesis in the cultural sphere.”<sup>27</sup> He then emphasises that he focuses “on the kinds of cultural production that undermine the thesis of Islamic decline.”<sup>28</sup> This is a significant correction to the conventional view that the 18th century was characterised by intellectual decline.

25 Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb*, Cambridge 2015, pp. 1 f.

26 Ibid., p. 2.

27 Ahmad S. Dallal, *Islam without Europe: Traditions of Reform in Eighteenth-Century Islamic Thought*, Chapel Hill 2018, p. 2.

28 Ibid., p. 5.

The 18th century is the century right before the Muslim world had faced Western colonialism. It is usually seen as a century of explicit decline, and the colonisation as an inescapable result of this decline. Regardless, this image has drastically changed due to the recent academic research based on archival materials and the primary sources from that time. An outstanding example is Dallal, who in his book, "Islam without Europe: Traditions of Reform in Eighteenth Century Islamic Thought", which was published in 2018, makes the following observation at the outset:

Throughout the eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth, the Muslim world had witnessed one of the most lively and creative periods in its intellectual history. Echoes of this intellectual activity could still be felt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, yet nothing in this latter period approximated the erudition and depth of eighteenth-century thought. In the eighteenth century, enormous energies were devoted to a systematic and comprehensive restructuring of Islamic thought.<sup>29</sup>

Dallal's work completely reverses the conventional view of the 18th century as a century of decline. He also proposes two other significant arguments. First, he contends that intellectual dynamism was not limited only to a particular geography. Instead, it was almost everywhere in the Muslim world from India to Yemen, from North and West Africa to Syria, as he conveys:

The cultural vitality of the eighteenth century was not limited to certain regions but was spread over most of the Muslim world. The distinguished thinkers of this period came from India and Arabia, North Africa and West Africa, as well as Syria and Yemen.<sup>30</sup>

The second significant argument Dallal makes is that this dynamism was not a result of European influence, because it has yet to be experienced during the 18th century. He states:

The diverse and rich legacies of this period – the vibrant eighteenth-century intellectual activities in the Muslim world that developed independent of European influence – are the subject of this book.<sup>31</sup>

Dallal further states that in the modern period most of the intellectual activities emerged in reaction to Western intervention and colonisation. This is in contradiction to the intellectual activities prior to the modern period that commenced with the Western intervention. It is easy to explain what happened in the Muslim world during the modern period by attributing it to the Western influence or

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29 Ibid., p. 1.

30 Ibid., p. 2.

31 Ibid.

the reaction to it. Nevertheless, how are we going to explain the events of the pre-modern period before European influence, in particular the high-level intellectual and political dynamism in the Muslim world during the 18th century?

Dallal opposes the conventional orientalist periodisation of Islamic history based on the idea that the French invasion of Egypt in 1789 is the beginning of modern history in the Middle East and the Muslim world because of Western influence. Dallal does not view the invasion of Egypt as the turning point of modern history. He argues that the French invasion of Egypt was a colonial expedition that did not shake the rest of the Muslim world with its modernising process until the 18th century. Dallal states that,

this periodization assumes generalized stagnation and decline in the eighteenth-century Muslim world. This idea of economic and political decline has been largely discredited in a substantial number of studies, especially by the historians of the Ottoman Empire and the Ottoman provinces.<sup>32</sup>

By way of example, Dallal mentions the work of Huri İslamoğlu-İnan (1987) and Reşat Kasaba (1988) who demonstrated that the Ottoman economy was very vibrant during the 18th century. As to the research on Ottoman provinces, he mentions the work of Beshara Doumani (1995), Hala Fettah (1997), Dina Rizk Khoury (1997) and Joel Beinin (2001). Dallal also mentions the work of Khaled El-Rouayheb who demonstrated, based on primary sources, that the 17th century is not characterised by decline.

#### 4.4 Peter Adamson's Critique of the 19th Century Decline Paradigm

Ahmad Dallal's work on "Islam without Europe" brings to mind what happened after European influence and colonisation. Did colonisation cause decline in the Islamic intellectual life? Peter Adamson's work attempts to answer this question by emphasising the continuity of dynamism in the Muslim world even after the colonial and European expansion. Adamson's work, in this regards, compliments Dallal's work based on primary sources.

Peter Adamson is a historian of Western and Islamic philosophy. He rejects the idea that Islamic philosophy declined after Averroes. Adamson asks:

Would any scholar now say in print, as Bertrand Russell notoriously did in his *History of Western Philosophy* (written in 1945), that 'Arabic philosophy is not important as original thought. Men like Avicenna and Averroes are essentially commentators'?<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Adamson, "If Aquinas Is a Philosopher Then so Are the Islamic Theologians", in: *Aeon*, February 2017, <https://aeon.co/ideas/>

He argues the opposite as he writes:

But really what happened is that, especially in the eastern part of the Islamic Empire, there was a continuing production of philosophical and philosophically-informed theological works which went on century after century, all the way up to the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 19th century.

Even in otherwise very good introductions to the history of philosophy, you'll see this idea that philosophy in the Islamic world dies after Averroes, that it all becomes mysticism or whatever. This is complete nonsense. Just in terms of the number of texts, there were many more philosophical works after that period than before. But they're very badly studied – and the main reason is that they had no influence on European culture. Specialists in the field have only started looking at them recently.<sup>34</sup>

Adamson further states that *kalām* (Islamic theology) should also be considered as part of Islamic philosophy and Muslim theologians should also be considered as philosophers the way such Christian theologians as Anselm, Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham are considered Western philosophers. Therefore, he states that philosophy should not be seen as limited only to the works of the followers of Aristotle, the *mashshaʿī* or Peripatetic school, pointing out that

even if the relevant texts remain largely unstudied, it is worth spreading the news that rationalism in Islam did not die with Averroes, and that the famous partisans of philosophy in the Islamic world, like al-Farābī, Averroes and Avicenna, had no monopoly on philosophical thinking there [...].<sup>35</sup>

In order to demonstrate so, Adamson uses the example of the work of the Muslim theologian and philosopher Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) whom he believes is one of the rarely explored Muslim philosophers. Adamson expresses that al-Rāzī

is a good example of the kind of figure who, if you're just following the tradition of philosophy in the Islamic world, would seem to be incredibly important. He was extremely influential; he provoked lots of responses in the following generations – people were always attacking him, quoting him, using him to understand Avicenna and so on.<sup>36</sup>

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if-aquinas-is-a-philosopher-then-so-are-the-islamic-theologians (last accessed June 6, 2020).

34 Peter Adamson, "The best books on Philosophy in the Islamic World", Interview by Nigel Warburton, in: *Five Books*, n. d., <https://fivebooks.com/best-books/peter-adamson-philosophy-islamic-world> (last accessed June 6, 2020).

35 Adamson, "If Aquinas Is a Philosopher Then so Are the Islamic Theologians".

36 Adamson, "The best books".

Adamson's work is significant for our concern here in that he argues against the decline paradigm even during the 19th century up until the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Although Adamson's historic focus does not encompass the post-Ottoman period, he emphasises the continuous dynamism of intellectual life in the Muslim world without decline or discontinuity.

#### 4.5 Jamil Ragep on the Continuous Flourishing of Science after al-Ghazālī for Centuries

An important discipline from which strong arguments against the decline paradigm have emerged is the history of astronomy in Islamic civilisation. By way of example, I will briefly present the view of Jamil Ragep. Ragep published a piece in "Newsletter of the British Society for the History of Science" where he clearly stated that

During the past half century or so, an ever-increasing body of scholarly work has shown that science in Islam not only continued after al-Ghazālī but in fact flourished for centuries thereafter.<sup>37</sup>

Ragep argues that the Mongol invasion, which is conventionally seen as a cause of decline, did not stop the scientific work in the Muslim world. Instead of decline or stagnation, Ragep argues, there was a revival during the 13th century in the Islamic scientific and philosophical works:

Of more interest is the 13th-century revival of Islamic scientific and philosophical traditions that took place in eastern Islam in the shadow, and eventually under the umbrella, of the Mongol invaders.<sup>38</sup>

Ragep provides an insightful account of how the decline paradigm could survive for such a long time, almost two centuries, despite the historical facts and findings derived from the primary sources:

If one accepts my argument regarding the significance and dimensions of this scientific tradition, one is faced with the inevitable question: How did it escape the keen eye of orientalist and historians of science for almost 200 years? And despite considerable research over the past fifty years that has falsified the view that there was no science after Ghazālī, why has it continued to be so persistent, in the scholarly secondary literature of both Islamic studies and history of science as well as in popular accounts?

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37 Jamil Ragep, "When Did Islamic Science Die? (And Who Cares?)" in: *Newsletter of the British Society for the History of Science* 85 (2008), p. 1.

38 Ibid., p. 2.

Here one sees the remarkable effects of received 'wisdom,' preconceived views, and political spin. [...] This was codified with particular force by Ernst Renan in his famous lecture, 'L'Islamisme et la science' [*sic*], delivered at the Sorbonne on the 29th of March, 1883. [...] In the 19th and early 20th centuries, these views were often combined with racial considerations.<sup>39</sup>

Ragep highlights the orientalist documentation of Islamic history emphasising the racial superiority behind it. He continues by providing an example of Pierre Duhem who

claimed that Semites, and Arabs in particular, were incapable of abstract thought not tied to physical reality, i. e. instrumentalism, which was a crucial component of his Christian positivism [...].<sup>40</sup>

And he continues:

After World War II, the racial dichotomization of Semites and Indo-Europeans went out of fashion, but what remained, as far as Islamic science was concerned, were the beliefs that its decline after 1200 was precipitous and could be attributed to religious fanaticism and a lack of social and institutional support. [...] Rather than benign neglect, what we have instead is an active antipathy toward Islam and its civilizational manifestation that is couched in blatantly political terms. [...] In fact, one might contend, as I have, that Ghazali's arguments against Aristotelian natural philosophy that Weinberg finds so appalling (one might ask what he thinks of the anti-Aristotelianism of Galileo, Descartes, and Hume) were an important factor in stimulating alternative cosmologies explored by various Islamic scientists.<sup>41</sup>

Ragep and other historians of science and astronomy in the Muslim world play a key role in the paradigm shift from the declinist to the anti-declinist view of the Islamic civilisation.

#### 4.6 David Lindberg: An Example of the Paradigm Shift

Now we can look at the work of another respected historian of science, David C. Lindberg, who was the Hildale Professor Emeritus of History of Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and also served as the president of the History of Science Society. In 1992, in his book, "The Beginnings of Western Science", Lindberg dedicated a section to the "Decline of Islamic Science" and its causes. However, in the second edition of the same book in 2007, he changed his view on the date of the decline of science in Islam from the 13th and 14th

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 2 f.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

centuries to the 16th century due to the recent archival research especially in the field of astronomy in the Muslim world. Because Lindberg's work reflects the shift of paradigm among historians, I will present below his earlier and later positions.

Lindberg argued in 1992 that scientific decline in the Muslim world during the 13th and 14th centuries happened due to two reasons: conservative religious forces and social and political instability, which caused a lack of prosperity and patronage. He contends:

But during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Islamic science went into decline; by the fifteenth century, little was left. How did this come about? Not enough research has been done to permit us to trace these developments with confidence, or to offer a satisfactory explanation, but several causal factors can be identified. First, *conservative religious forces* made themselves increasingly felt. Sometimes this took the form of outright opposition, as in the notorious burning of books on the foreign sciences in Cordoba in the late 10th century. More often, however, the effect was subtler – not the extinction of scientific activity, but alteration of its character, by the imposition of a very narrow definition of utility. In other words, science became naturalized in Islam – losing its alien quality and finally becoming Islamic science, instead of Greek science practiced on Islamic soil – by accepting a greatly restricted handmaiden role. This meant a loss of attention to many problems that had once seemed important. Second, a flourishing scientific enterprise requires peace, prosperity, and patronage. All three began to disappear in the late medieval Islam due to continuous disastrous warfare among factions and petty states within Islam and foreign invasions.<sup>42</sup>

Lindberg cites the fall of Andalusia and Baghdad as the causes behind the disappearance of political stability and patronage:

In the West, the Christian Reconquista of Spain began to make serious, if sporadic, headway after about 1065 and continued until the entire peninsula was in Christian hands two centuries later. Toledo fell to Christian arms in 1085, Cordoba in 1236, and Seville in 1248. In the east, the Mongols began to apply pressure on the borders of Islam early in the thirteenth century; in 1258 they took Baghdad, thus bringing the Abbasid caliphate to an end. In the face of debilitating warfare, economic failure, and the resulting loss of patronage, the sciences were unable to sustain themselves.<sup>43</sup>

Strikingly, in the 2007 edition of his book, Lindberg revised his views on the history of Islamic science. What the first edition presented as the causes of decline,

42 David C. Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science: The European Scientific Tradition in Philosophical, Religious, and Institutional Context, 600 B. C. to A. D. 1450*, Chicago

<sup>1</sup> 1992, p. 180.

43 Ibid., p. 181.



the second edition presents as the causes of dynamism. He now argues that political turmoil in the Muslim world had a positive impact on scientific activities rather than being a tragic cause of decline asserting that:

one might suppose that such political turmoil would have been debilitating and, along with growing religious opposition to Aristotelian natural philosophy and metaphysics, would have resulted in loss of patronage and a decline of scientific activity. Ironically, the surprising truth is that many of the conquerors became patrons of the sciences. For example Hulagu Khan, who sacked Baghdad, was also (along with his brother Mangu) a patron of the Maragha observatory; and Ulugh Beg, grandson of Tamerlane (the great Mongol conqueror of central Asia), saw to the construction, support, and management of the Samarqand madrasa and observatory. In Spain, Christians, Muslims, and Jews had a long history of living and working in harmony until the events leading up to the expulsion of Jews in 1492.<sup>44</sup>

Lindberg also revised his views on the adverse impact of religious opposition by claiming that this impact was limited only to the issues with theological import:

Finally, religious opposition was confined to issues with theological import and had little or no effect on the natural sciences. The truth is that the image of decline in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries is not the product of research in manuscript archives, but an assumption made in the absence of research and encouraged for its usefulness as a tool in religious polemics over the relative merits of Islam and Christianity: which religious culture wins the natural science sweepstakes?<sup>45</sup>

Lindberg concluded that the current archival research demonstrates beyond doubt that science in the Muslim world, in particular in the fields of astronomy, mathematics and medicine, continued to flourish up until the 16th century:

Finally, current archival research in the history of Islamic astronomy reveals decisively that at least this specific discipline flourished well into the sixteenth century – producing a continuous flow of knowledgeable, sometimes brilliant, astronomers, scattered throughout greater Islam. As for other sciences, thousands of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish manuscripts remain in libraries from Europe to the Middle East, unexamined. What they may contain we have no way of knowing until we look.<sup>46</sup>

Lindberg also mentions two other factors that contributed to the flourishing of science in Islam: “a highly diverse, multireligious, multilingual, cosmopolitan

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44 David C. Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science: The European Scientific Tradition in Philosophical, Religious, and Institutional Context, Prehistory to A. D. 1450*, Chicago 2007, pp. 190 f.

45 Ibid., p. 191.

46 Ibid.

culture” and “utilitarian motives”. Consequently, he argues, “a scientific tradition, foreign in both origin and content, could take root and flourish”.<sup>47</sup>

#### 4.7 Is the Decline Narrative an Orientalist Invention or the Result of Grounded Scholarship?

The above works I have surveyed may lead us to concur with Asad Q. Ahmed, a professor from the University of California, Berkeley, who says:

The narrative of decline in the post-classical period of Islam, from the 1200s to the present, is an invention of rather uninformed orientalist scholarship. In fact, in recent research, we have discovered a rather vibrant tradition sustained well into the late 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>48</sup>

Ahmed also rejects the idea that Islamic civilisation declined after al-Ghazālī, conveying:

This version of history is based on a meta-historical attitude that orientalist scholarship took towards various cultures partly to colonise, partly to write one history against another and without ultimately any analysis of details found in very technical texts in the Islamic tradition.<sup>49</sup>

Ahmed thus concludes that the lack of rigorous archival research in the classical texts reproduces the orientalist notion of Islamic declinism that has dominated this historic narrative.

### 5 Critics of the Ottoman Decline Paradigm

Before ending this article that is dedicated to the periodisation of Islamic history in general, it may be enlightening to have a brief look at the specific paradigm shift in Ottoman historiography from declinism to anti-declinism. During recent decades, we observe a radical and predominantly shared shift in the views of the historians of the Ottoman Empire regarding the rejection of the decline paradigm.

Fernand Braudel's work on the history of the Mediterranean drew attention to the importance of the Ottoman Empire as part of world and European history but also, more importantly, to the continuous and dynamic Ottoman existence in the Mediterranean. Therefore, Braudel's work can be seen as an instigator to

47 Ibid.

48 Haneen Rafi, “The Golden Age of Islam Reinterpreted”, in: *Dawn*, November 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1219040> (last accessed June 6, 2020).

49 Ibid.

revisit Ottoman history without being blocked by the decline paradigm.<sup>50</sup> Cemal Kafadar illustrates this change under the influence of Braudel as follows:

The best indicator of the shifting winds may be the French historian Fernand Braudel's change of opinion regarding the post-sixteenth-century Ottomans. Whereas his celebrated work on the Mediterranean continued the decline paradigm, by the time he wrote his *Civilization and Capitalism* he had come to think that "one cannot properly speak of the decadence of the Turkish Empire before the first decades of the nineteenth century."<sup>51</sup>

It is also important to notice the change in the works of Halil İnalcık who used to adopt the decline paradigm but later changed his views.<sup>52</sup> In his early book, "The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300–1600", İnalcık dedicates one section to "The Decline of the Ottoman Empire" where he identifies several causes of decline including the disintegration of the state system, not adhering to the developments in Europe, the weakening economic system, and a narrow critical outlook to the outside world.<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, in his opinion a major reason for the decline of the Ottoman Empire was religious fanaticism. İnalcık also dedicates a chapter in this book to "The Triumph of Fanaticism".<sup>54</sup>

Hence, one can say that questioning, criticising and even rejecting the decline paradigm among the historians of the Ottoman Empire is very common today. Critics such as, but not limited to, Norman Itzkowitz, Ariel Salzmann, Suraiya Faroqhi, Jane Hathaway, Cemal Kafadar, Linda Darling, Erol Özvar, Caroline Finkel, Matthew Kelly, Khaled El-Rouayheb, Fatih Çalışır, Guy Burak and many others have all been critical of the Ottoman decline paradigm.<sup>55</sup>

50 Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century*, London 1984, p. 482.

51 Kafadar, "Ottoman Decline", p. 32.

52 Halil İnalcık, "Periods in Ottoman History", in: Hasan Celal Güzel (ed.), *The Turks: Ottomans* 2002, pp. 15–21.

53 Halil İnalcık, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300–1600*, London 2000.

54 Ibid., pp. 179–85.

55 See the following works as examples. Norman Itzkowitz, *Ottoman Empire and Islamic Tradition*, New York 1972; Ariel Salzmann, "An Ancien Régime Revisited: 'Privatization' and Political Economy in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Empire", in: *Politics & Society* 21/4 (1993), pp. 393–423; Suraiya Faroqhi, "Politics and Socio-Economic Change in the Ottoman Empire of the Later Sixteenth Century", in: Metin Kunt/Christine Woodhead (eds.), *Süleyman the Magnificent and His Age: The Ottoman Empire in the Early Modern World*, New York/London 1995, pp. 91–113; Jane Hathaway, "Problems of Periodization in Ottoman History: The Fifteenth through the Eighteenth Centuries", in: *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin* 20/2 (1996), pp. 25–31; Kafadar, "Ottoman Decline"; Linda T. Darling, "Another Look at Periodization in Ottoman History", in: *The Turkish Studies Association Journal* 26/2 (2002), pp. 19–28; Erol Özvar, "Osmanlı

## 6 Conclusion: “If not Decline, Then What?”

If the decline paradigm is no longer useful in dividing Islamic and Ottoman history into periods, then we will need a replacement for it. I will conclude this article by briefly drawing attention to some of the alternatives to the decline paradigm. “If not decline, then what?” asks Daniel Goffman in his book, “The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe”, and answers as follows:

The fact remains that the empire did in the end collapse, and that perhaps at first a malaise and then a decline must at some point have settled in before the final dissolution. Nevertheless, we can at least try to contextualize this hard reality by recollecting that the historian always has the advantage of hindsight. We need to remember that until after the First World War, the Ottoman Empire still existed. For someone living in 1669, for example, it surely seemed more likely that Italy rather than the Ottoman Empire would disintegrate; for someone living in 1789 it seemed more likely that France would cease to exist than that the Ottomans would do so; and even for someone living in 1919 it still must have seemed probable that some truncated Ottoman entity would endure. It makes good sense, I think, to conceive the early modern Ottoman world broadly as a multi-faceted entity rather than narrowly as a state embarking on a long death march, to insist that rot in some of its components did not mean consuming decay, and may even have reflected brilliance onto other features of the state and society. In other words, we need to understand that the decline model is not so much wrong as entirely insufficient; it conceals behind its visage simply too much that was creative, enduring, and resolute.<sup>56</sup>

Goffman is very critical of the decline paradigm, but he fails to offer a different alternative to it. His solution is a more nuanced and softened critique of the historical narrative rather than a new paradigm to replace it.

Another critic of the decline paradigm, Ali A. Allawi, however, offers a different and uncommon explanation to what happened in order to replace the decline paradigm. He states that the decline of the Islamic civilisation was due to

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Tarihini Dönemlendirme Meselesi ve Osmanlı Nasihat Literatürü”, in: *Divan* 2 (1999), pp. 135–151; Caroline Finkel, “‘The Treacherous Cleverness of Hindsight’: Myths of Ottoman Decay”, in: Gerald MacLean (ed.), *Re-Orienting the Renaissance*, Basingstoke/New York 2005, pp. 148–74; Matthew Kelly, “The Fall of Decline: The Decline Paradigm and its Lessons”, in: *Revue de l’Institut des belles-lettres arabes IBLA* 201 (1/2008), pp. 101–17; El-Rouayheb, “The Myth”; Fatih Çalışır, “Decline of a ‘Myth’: Perspectives on the Ottoman ‘Decline’”, in: *Tarih Okulu Dergisi* 9 (2011), pp. 37–60; Guy Burak, *The Second Formation of Islamic Law: The Hanafi School in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, Cambridge 2017.

56 Daniel Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge 2002, p. 127.

the “abandonment of the underpinnings of the traditional Islamic world view”<sup>57</sup> by the secular minded and the fundamentalist Muslims. He also elaborates stating that

Islamic science and medicine continued to thrive within their own terms of reference, until the fateful encounter with the expansionist European powers. The collapse of the innovation and creativity in the world of Islam was not the result of the fall of the Abbasid Empire in the thirteenth century, but a much more recent phenomenon. It is intimately connected to the abandonment of the underpinnings of the traditional Islamic world view, in the past two centuries, by a succession of secular-minded and fundamentalist Muslims. The first jettisoned this world view as a matter of principle; the second accepted the fruits of Western civilization with no understanding of their roots in the Western experience. They simply ‘Islamized’ them. Purpose and meaning was lost.<sup>58</sup>

Allawi’s explanation, which is also related to the cultural domain, offers a completely different analysis to what went wrong in the Muslim world during the last two centuries. Unusually, he puts the blame of decline on both secularists and Islamists who used opposite arguments to justify abandoning the traditional Islamic world view.

Curiously, also the periodisation of Islamic history as adopted by secularists and fundamentalists is very similar. Both periodisations overlap as they accept a golden age in the beginning of Islamic history and a dark age during its second half which may be called the post-classical age. Yet the reasoning and discourse of the two groups are very different from each other. They both reject the heritage of the post-classical period in Islamic history as they depict that period as a dark age, but paradoxically for different reasons. Secularists blame that period for being too religious and fanatic while fundamentalists blame it for being too rationalist and secularist. Allawi reverses their approach by contending that the cause of decline was not the existence of the traditional Islamic world view but its abandoning. From his perspective, had Muslims maintained the traditional world view, there would have been no decline during the last two centuries.

The search for alternative explanations to the decline paradigm in the literature should take into account the views of the Ottoman intellectuals and statesmen who rejected cultural decline and as an alternative to it explained what happened as a military defeat, in particular during World War I due to a great power imbalance between the Ottoman army and the armies of the states which allied against it. Muṣṭafa Şabri (d. 1373/1954), the penultimate *shaykh al-islām* of the Ottoman

57 Ali A. Allawi, *The Crisis of Islamic Civilization*, New Haven 2009, p. 233.

58 Ibid., pp. 232 f.

Empire, offered this kind of explanation as an alternative to the decline paradigm. His answer to the question of decline may be seen as an example and as a representative of a larger group of thinkers who shared his views:

alongside [the degeneration of the Ottoman Empire] continued the degeneration, in the face of modern empirical science, of the old science, that had for long centuries taken charge of the argument defending the creed of Islam. Now, this degeneration stemmed not from [any deficiency in] the old science itself [...] but as a result of the perspectives of a group of individuals who fawned upon modern science in order to curry favour with the nations that had won victory by means of the weapons that they had derived from that science. It was thus that they mistook martial victory for intellectual victory.<sup>59</sup>

We can conclude from this passage that the Ottomans themselves were divided about the causes of decline. Some saw it as a military defeat of Muslims while others saw it as a cultural defeat of Muslims by the West. Şabî's approach reflects the view of the majority of the Ottoman statesmen and thinkers who believed that the cause of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire was military defeat, not cultural decline. The military defeat paradigm as an explanatory model had dominated the Ottoman discourse for a long time. The declinist paradigm replaced the military defeat narrative and unreservedly prevailed during the Republican period, especially in the official historiography, including textbooks and political discourse.

But is not military defeat also a sign of decay? It was explained either as a result of decline or of an imbalance in military power. Those who saw the issue only as a military defeat did not see it as a result of cultural decline. Yet those who accepted the decline paradigm saw the military defeat as an outcome of the decline during the previous centuries.

Muslims and in particular those who lived in the Ottoman Empire were defeated during World War I. The destruction this military defeat caused and the ensuing political, economic and cultural colonisation have been pushed to the background by the orientalist historians and their Muslim followers for a long time. Instead, orientalist emphasised the decline and collapse of the empire by reference to its internal dynamics. This approach placed the blame on the victims. As postcolonial theorists point out, other parts of the world have experienced a similar fate. It is argued that Africa was colonised because of the decline

59 Muşafa Şabî, *Mawqif al-'aql wa-l-'ilm wa-l-'ālam min rabb al-'ālamīn wa-'ibadīhi l-mursalin*, Beirut: al-Maktaba al-'Aşriyya 2012, p. 109 f. I thank Hasan Spiker for drawing my attention to this quote in a presentation in Cambridge. Translation belongs to him.

of the African civilisation, thus ignoring the responsibility of the white man's colonial role in the region. Likewise, if India was exploited this was because of the decline of the Indian civilisation not because of the invasion and exploitation of the imperial powers.

So what is the relationship between cultural development and military defeat: can a culturally developed country be defeated by a culturally less developed country, or by the military alliance of multiple countries? As history shows, this is quite possible. Who was more developed: the Andalusians or the Latins who invaded Andalusia? The Mongolians or the Abbasids in Baghdad? The Germans or the Russians in World War II? As I have presented above, according to Ibn Khaldūn the more progressed a civilisation the more vulnerable it becomes to foreign forces. This is what I called the Khaldunian paradox: economic and cultural progress, if the necessary measures are not taken, eventually erode the moral and military power of a society. This paradox may help us to understand what happened to the Muslim world as the decline paradigm can no longer stand against grounded research and newly understood data from the primary sources.

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