The Modern and Early Modern Middle East SP 16: choose one prompt in each section

Section I

1. Until recently, the meta-narrative of Middle Eastern history posited the period from the end of the sixteenth century into the nineteenth century as one of “decline,” followed by a period of reform/modernization and national revival. Discuss the origins and evolution of that narrative, Western and indigenous contributions, critical responses, and alternative visions.

2. Late 19th century Islamic modernism has been presented as a response to “the challenge of the West,” and an alternative interpretation identifies “indigenous roots” of Islamic reformism in the Islamicate world of the 18th century. Similarly, some social historians reject the thesis of Western-induced capitalist development after 1800 and stress indigenous roots of social and economic modernity. Clarify the developments, people, ideas, or movements being referred to, explain what is at stake in this debate, and give your own take.

Section II

1. The literature on women, gender, sexuality, and the family in Middle Eastern history has developed unevenly in terms of geographical and chronological “coverage,” sources used, and themes or subjects addressed. Assess the literature you have sampled that addresses this history. Is it possible at this point to construct an outline of this history during the past two to three centuries? What should be highlighted? What gaps need to be investigated? And how could this history be integrated into “mainstream” narratives?

2. How would you organize an encyclopedia essay or a lecture series on the social and cultural history of the modern Middle East? Would it parallel the standard periodization in political history? What are the main themes and sub-themes you would include, and what interpretational emphases would work best?

Section III

1. Albert Hourani suggested that we should regard Arab nationalism and Islamism (“political Islam”) as kindred movements. Others have stressed the ideological differences and political competition between the two. What are the arguments and is it possible to reconcile them?

2. Since c. 1800, the Middle East has been an arena of competition among the major world powers. Explain how imperialism and neo-imperialism in all of their forms have affected the course of Middle Eastern history. Are there patterns that can be identified?