The development of scientific activity in the Ottoman Empire and other contemporary Muslim countries has so far attracted little if any attention from either dedicated scientific or Science Studies, despite the long established fact that in the ‘classical’ age, Islamic civilization actively contributed to the elaboration of scientific traditions, which originated in different surrounding cultures (Hellenistic, Sassanid, Indian, etc.). At the Sixth Annual Congress of the German Middle East Studies Association (DAVO) in December 1998, a study group on ‘Arabic-Ottoman Sciences in the Modern Period’ organized a panel in which five research projects covering the 17th through 19th centuries were presented.

It is the intention of the study group on ‘Arabic-Ottoman Sciences in the Modern Period’ to create a platform for the discussion of classical Islamic sciences in their proper historical context.1 However, even today, the presentation of a grand narrative account for this alleged decline of Arab science is still hard to defend, though the notion of ‘decline’ is hard to define.2 The view is that these sciences were only rediscovered after the clashes with European colonialism and imperialism in the course of the 19th century, when ‘Western science’ eventually supplanted the ‘classical sciences’ almost completely.3 The fact is, however, that many disciplines flourished until the mid-20th century.

Theories of decline are numerous. A possible number of reasons have been suggested in support for this alleged decline:4

To what Edward Said’s notorious accusations of ‘Orientalism’ suggest, pupil of Sylvestre de Sacy, the archetypal of Sadian orientalism, started as early as the mid-19th century to pinpoint the specific accomplishments of classical Islamic sciences in their proper historical context.5

While in the second half of the 19th century the massive spread of interest in scientific matters to a growing literate public in the ‘Western world’, but to a similar degree in the Arab speaking countries, Dagmar Gall (Leipzig) characterized in her study the relationship of the Muslim world to the fundamentals of the scientific revolution in the late 19th century as a ‘pedagogical dialogue’ in which the former actively sought to create a public understanding of science. In this process, only subsequently would the importance of religious aspects of science gain greater importance, which leads to a more fundamental question: What is the influence of the contemporary debate rather than classical Arabic sciences than, perhaps, the writings of the 19th century Darwinism debate in which a considerable number of Arab Christian authors were involved.

10. See the Islamic Science homepage at the University of Pennsylvania.