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From Montreal, Canada, I'm Suzette Grillo, the dean of the college of international studies at the University of Oklahoma. Welcome to World Views at CIS.

On today's program, we'll hear from Professor Yaron Ayalon about historical relations in the Middle East, and particularly his work on the Ottoman Empire.

"If they were more integrated into this greater society, if they were not strictly separated from the majority of Muslims then what do we really know about these guys? And, maybe we need a fresh look at the history of the Jews of the Ottoman Empire."

We will also talk to Hesham Issawi, an Egyptian director and filmmaker, about his work – and about the challenges of working in the film industry.

"So it was always in the movies, you see America through the movies. Definitely movies like Grease, for example. I remember when I was younger I had a big poster of John Travolta on my wall."

First, Yaron Ayalon. Dr. Ayalon was a professor of International and Area Studies and Judaic Studies at the University of Oklahoma for several years, but now works as a professor of history and serves as the Associate Director of the Jewish Studies Program at Ball State University. He is one of the few scholars that focuses on the social setting of Jews living during the Ottoman Empire. His most recent book, *Natural Disasters in the Ottoman Empire: Plague, Famine and Other Misfortunes*, focuses on natural disasters during the early modern period and how they affected life under Ottoman rule.

Yaron Ayalon, welcome to World Views.

Thanks for having me.

It's great to have you back on campus Yaron. It's like having you back at home. I just want to start by getting a little bit of background on what it is you do. Your work is really fascinating focusing on the Ottoman Empire and Jews in the Ottoman Empire. You're a Middle East historian, even though your research may be more of historical in nature, I know you teach about contemporary issues and we're going to try to talk about both, but just kind of tell me a little bit about how you got into working on these issues, particularly looking at Jews and the Ottoman Empire, and we can go from there.

Okay, thanks. So I'm a historian, as you mentioned, of the Middle East, and the Ottoman Empire is the main area that I've been working on in recent years, and I really got to it. There was no one defining moment in my life. It was really just a few things. One thing that led to another, a course I took in college, a book I read and so on and so forth, fascination with Turkish language, and then with the Ottoman language and Arabic that I already knew before. And eventually, also while I was in graduate school, I got exposed to the Jewish history element, which coming from Israel, I've known something about, but not as not at a professional level and all of these combined to an interest in social history of the Ottoman Empire in general, but more specifically in the history of Jews in the Ottoman Empire, which really, there aren't that many people who

work on that issue.

Well, what can you tell us about Jews in the Ottoman Empire? Because from my historical background, I didn't really necessarily learn about the Jewish influence in that part of the world.

There are a few things to bear in mind why it is actually important to study Jews in the Ottoman Empire. First of all, Jews in the Ottoman Empire in the 16th to 18th century produced probably the most influential texts of Jewish law that were produced anywhere in the Jewish world. The works were far more influential even for European Jews than the works produced in Europe by Jews, that's one and they still are. And two, if you want to look at a more contemporary relevance, Jews who were descendants of those Ottoman Jews, that is just came from Greece and Turkey and Bulgaria and, of course, the entire Arab world were the majority of Jews in Israel, until at least the 1990s, when the huge wave of Russian Jews came along, until then they were a majority. And so this is not a negligible segment of the Jewish world. It's just a segment that has been neglected for various social or political reasons.

Well, when you talk about how they had produced some of the most influential texts in Jewish law, can you just give some examples of what you mean by that in terms of, you said Jewish law to clarify, what exactly are we talking about here?

Yes, thanks. And that's a good question, especially for me, since I am a historian, and I don't actually deal with Jewish law or with what's called Halakha, I don't deal with any of those aspects. I really use those texts as a historian, so I try to fish for historical anecdotes that are present in those texts. But for example, we have the great scholar who lived in Palestine in the 16th century, Joseph Karo, who's work, Shulhan Arukh, The Set Table in English, is really one of the most authoritative texts of Jewish law, and it covers the entire life of a Jewish person, including all the daily rituals and what to do, and all sorts of other circumstances. And that is just one example. And so that text has been with some modifications accepted by Eastern European Jews, who largely follow different traditions and yet have accepted this as authority. And that's just one example. So, in my work, I'm not concerned so much with the legal issues that these texts provide, but rather with what they can actually tell us about the social setting in which those guys produce those texts and the social setting in general for Jews living in that period in the Eastern Mediterranean.

So the way in which they live their lives, and as you mentioned kind of the daily rituals, daily practices it's the traditions in terms of how people live their lives from day to day.

Yes. Yes.

Let's talk about your most recent book, also focused on the Ottoman Empire, natural disasters in particular. Plague, famine and other misfortunes, the title of your book. What can you tell us about natural disasters in the Ottoman Empire? Because this is a fascinating topic that truly natural disasters have a significant impact on the trajectory of human life. And so what did you learn from the Ottoman Empire that we can learn from today?

Well, we can learn many things today, and if you actually look at my book, it opens, the

introduction opens with the story of the 2013 tornados here in Oklahoma. Maybe it's very fitting that I'm sitting here and you're asking me those questions right now. And there was quite a bit of relevance, you asked about other disasters. There were earthquakes, there were floods, there were fires, but you could say fire is man-made, but it is often tied to the eruption of other disasters and so on. I got to studying natural disasters in the Ottoman Empire really through, again, one thing led to another, some of it must have been my fascination with Hollywood movies where major disasters happen. And I want to study that, but I was interested in what these disasters can actually teach us about human societies, and in my case Ottoman society in the early, modern period 16th to 18th century mostly. And really what I've seen is that those disasters, in at least in the Ottoman case, but also probably European society before the 19th century, such disasters happened so often that we can't really treat them as is an anomaly, they teach us a lot about human psychology at the time and connections between people, bonds between individuals and so on, the relationship between individuals and the state. And one of the things that I discovered was that, thanks to all of this evidence that was generated during those events. So, these events were followed by a lot of written evidence that we still have today. So, in a sense, we can be thankful for those natural disasters as historians, I'm saying. And so, one of the things that I've learned from that is really that the actual distinctions between different communities, Muslims and Christians and Jews was a lot less meaningful than what other historians have told us so far. The borders between different religious groups were actually rather fluid and in a sense, that's one of the things that led me to my current work, which is looking at Jews and really asking the question well, if they were more integrated into this greater society, if they were not strictly separated from the majority of Muslims, then what do we really know about these guys? And maybe we need a fresh look at the history of the Jews of the Ottoman Empire. So that's really how one study led to the next.

This comment you made about how the distinctions between these communities were a lot less important than given your study of what natural disasters happen and how people responded. You mentioned that was kind of surprising, and I'm surprised too by hearing this, and I think many people are because we tend to hear over and over again today in the media and elsewhere, that these are just long-standing separations and hatreds and lack of community, I guess, among these distinct members of the community. And yet what you're saying is that this is maybe more of a modern thing, these kinds of distinctions, that is less fluid today. So, what has happened? What's the intervention? What led to that kind of separation or lack of fluidity in the community that we see today versus what you saw 16th to 18th century.

I think that your question is spot on in that sense because what we see in the earlier periods is really that there wasn't a formal official system of separation of placing Jews and Christians in a sense anyone who wasn't Muslim as inferior to the Muslims. And we see expressions of that in legal courthouses and various other places, but mostly those were ideas that were imposed from above that the majority of society didn't find to be natural and often even rejected them in practice. What we see on day to day interactions is that they were very limited, such borders,. Sure, a Jew would normally not go into a mosque and pray, so I'm saying there were some borders, and typically when it came to the collection and dispensation of charity money that was typically done within the religious community. But other than those few examples, we really see that kind of fluidity and people got along quite well within the system that officially discriminated certain people that is if you were a Jew living in that community, let's say, in

Syria, in 1810, you knew that you could have all of these great opportunities in part because the system officially discriminated against you. Now, what happens is the 19th century comes along. And because of various conditions in the Ottoman Empire, it becomes more and more under the influence of European powers. This was less an imperialist thing and more an issue of the Ottomans borrowing money, spending all of it before they even actually got the funds for the loan and then having to borrow again. And at some point, the Europeans were effectively the owners of the Ottoman economy. And so many of the Europeans are so invested. And by Europeans, I mean mostly British and French in the 19th century, but there were a few others. But they're so invested in the empire they also get to dictate policy. That's just how it works. And one of the things that they insisted on was that the Ottomans would launch the series of reforms. They cared about their money, of course, but they wanted the Ottomans to launch a series of reforms to change their empire and make all the Christians, they didn't care much about Jews, the Jews were a byproduct of this, make all the Christians legally equal to Muslims. And so the Ottomans complied with those requests in 2 decrees, issued in 1839 and 1856, and as a result of this, centuries of social order that was known and convenient to people was threatened and eventually went away. So the main problem begins with those changes that aim to put Muslims and non-Muslims legally on the same level, even though in practice they were on the same level before, but the legal issue is different and that creates many problems. Now, some historians will tell you, well it's Zionism who did it, at least for the Jews, they say, well, Zionism came along and till Zionism Jews and Muslims got along fairly well, but actually Jews and Muslims started not getting along very well even before Zionism, and most Jews who live under the Ottoman Empire rejected Zionism at first, because their life was quite comfortable and they weren't experiencing the same crisis that Russian Jews were experiencing or Eastern European Jews. There was no pressing matter that would have prompted them to launch a nationalist movement as the case was with Eastern European Jews. And so, it took quite a bit of time until Ottoman Jews or former Ottoman Jews, if go into the 20th century, started to adopt Zionism, or the idea that Jews need to go elsewhere and settle in Palestine or in the land of Israel, much later in the 30s and the 40s when they realize that maybe things are not as they used to be and we need to find the solution. But this was more of a practical embracing of this idea. Then an ideological one.

Let's finish with what you're here to talk about now here at the University of Oklahoma to talk about Ottoman tolerance. Because obviously, what you're suggesting is an imposition of a lack of tolerance among various members of the community. So, what is it that that you have to tell us about tolerance among the Ottomans.

So tolerance to me is somewhat of an elusive term because I use it because I have not been able to find a better term for what I'm trying to describe. So I use tolerance, and the problem with this term is that we look at the term tolerance today and we say, well, you couldn't possibly be tolerant if you claim that based on religious distinctions some people are inferior in class. How does that work with tolerance? So maybe we need a different term, but until we find it, let's put it this way, tolerance, we need to look at it differently. If we are going back two or three hundred years, the meaning of tolerance has changed. It's a different meaning than the one we have today. And it means that yes, state may have legal distinctions between members of different classes. It may not be very different than a distinction that the modern state does between citizens and non-citizens. The whole concept of citizenship was very alien to the Ottomans in the 18th century,

but the concept of members of different religious sects were not, so they discriminated along those lines instead of along Citizens versus aliens. But within that context, if we look specifically at what the system actually did, yes, it provided for some of these legal discriminations. And based on these legal discriminations we do have instances here and there of people who took advantage of these legal conditions to actually persecute and discriminate and launch forced migrations and forced conversions of Jews into Islam and so on. Those things happen, but they are actually the exception, not the norm. The norm was that the Jews were with very few restrictions fully integrated into that society if they weren't, it's because maybe someone grew up poor and didn't have the opportunities, and then that person would be equivalent to a Muslim person who grew up poor. But those who had the means were equally able to be integrated into that system. If we look commercially, for instance, so we know that Jews were involved in almost all segments of the Ottoman economy. Ottoman Jews were to a large degree responsible for the American tied connections between the Ottoman Empire and Italy, and hence also with the application of it, also with Western Europe in the New World Trade networks, that Ottoman Jews helped build and which non-Jews relied on as well, so to speak, about limited opportunities because of that discrimination is just not very accurate than not supported by the evidence that we have.

Alright Yaron, thank you so much for providing some historical context because again, I think the stories you're telling us today are obviously very relevant to what we're seeing happening today, and I would love to carry on that conversation the next time. We'll have to look at what's happening today in Turkey. Alright, thank you so much for being here.

Thank you for having me.

You have been listening to my conversation with Professor Yaron Ayalon about his scholarly work on the Ottoman Empire. His most recent book, *Natural Disasters in the Ottoman Empire: Plague, Famine, and Other Misfortunes*, highlights the impact of natural disasters on social life during the early modern period, and particularly how they affected life under Ottoman rule.

For more information about Yaron Ayalon and his scholarly work, or to leave a comment or question about this conversation, you can visit our website at cisworldviews.com.

Next, my colleague Rebecca Cruise speaks with Hesham Issawi. Hesham is a director and filmmaker from Egypt. He has written and directed a number of documentary and short films, including a feature film, entitled *American East*, that won best picture at the Madrid Film Festival and a short film, *Brother in Terror*, produced for the History Channel.

Hesham Issawi, welcome to World Views.

Hi, thank you for having me.

You are a very prolific director, and you are also from Egypt though you spend your time and Egypt as well as in the United States in LA specifically. But I was wondering, I'm always curious how people get into this line of business. What was it that drew you to film that drew you

to directing specifically in your youth and later on?

Well, actually, I went to school in Chicago, I went to Columbia in Chicago. So, I start to get into the documentaries when I was at school. For me, I did a lot of editing. So, I start as an editor of documentaries, and I did producing documentaries. I worked for a couple of History Channel and Learning channel. As a freelancer, basically. And at some point, I felt I need to move on from the documentary. Documentary is a great form, but you don't have much control because the story, you can have the idea, but the story is formed by the other people who you are interviewing. So, I just felt that I needed to move on, and this is where California came in. So, I moved to a LA, to Los Angeles. I had some friends who I went school with, they were there, and I start to get into doing short films, but I was working post productions. That was my main thing. So, I started at jobs in post-production and editing, and I started short films, you know, financed by my own self and other friends basically. And since I went to film school, so I have... I knew DP, I knew editors, I knew producers because these are my friends I went to school with, and we start to use each other and just suddenly things start to move for shorts to short until, I think 9/11. After 9/11, this is when I start to feel that, oh yeah, this is the time when I have to make something about, since I'm background Egyptian, and I'm a Muslim too so it felt time to do something about Arab Americans.

Well, and I definitely want talk about some of the projects that came out specifically around that time. As you said, you grew up in Egypt and you are Muslim. What sort of films did you grow up watching? Were there a lot of American films? Or how did they influence perhaps your path or your image of the West.

Oh yeah, of course. I grew up in the 80s and early 90s, and Egypt and definitely it was all American movies. American and Egyptian movies because Egypt has a big industry. So, I grew up watching both, but definitely American moves has a big influence and it has a beginning for a in terms of just... you just want to travel to America. I travel to Europe when I was young, but never to America. So, it was always the movies. You know, you see America through the movies. And definitely movies, you know, like Grease for example. When I grew up, I remember when I was younger I had a big poster of John Travolta on my wall. That was for my generation, it was pretty big at that time. But many movies in and definitely shaped our view the states, and how it looks. It's not about money. It's not traveling to make money or traveling to get a job. No, no, but it's a quality of life. It's a standard of life. It's that sense of freedom you can have really... it was a dream.

And you were making films, documentaries and others before 9/11, but 9/11 is obviously this big event. And I imagine understanding the power that films and image can have it became important to you to help portray a better image or different image. So, you have two, I'm sure there are others, but two films that come out after 9/11 that I'd like to talk about. The first is a short that came out in 2003 "T for Terrorist", and this is a look at how Muslim or Arab actors are portrayed in Hollywood. And can you tell us a little bit about this.

Yeah, "T for Terrorist", that a short film we actually finance it was. When I moved to LA, I didn't know many Arabs at all. Actually, most of my friends were Americans I went to school with... so I get introduced some of them, and some of them work in the industry, and most of

them, they were just doing that. They are actors actually like say ..., he is known for acting and Hollywood movies, but always the terrorist guy. So he did executive decisions, he did through lie. You find all these movies is very well known typical stereotype. And I get to know him well, of course, we share a lot of things and this where it came that we make a movie about him or about his life in the Hollywood industry. But in a way, we've lived the story instead of... it's always... the white guy is the hero now have the Middle Eastern guy's a hero, but through something and became "T for Terrorist." But it became... after we finished it, it became so classic, the short film, we were traveled with it, one to many festivals and actually end up getting ... in the movie. And he came, we pitch him the story and then to come for one day, and he was generous enough to do it for nothing actually, and the he loved the experience. But there was that push, there was that emotion, of course, when you are doing it, you are so much involved to get a movie done. You don't think about all of that, but looking back at it, definitely we had that urge to express really something that bothering us. That's not right with... because this guy here, some of them are good actors and they deserve better than that.

You mentioned Tony, so you work with him again in a larger film, American East, in 2007 around that time. And this really does paint a much more diverse picture of Arabs in America, the challenges that they face within the community and in a post 9/11 United states. And was that motivation similar from "T for Terrorist"?

Yeah, on the last of shooting, we shot that short in seven days, and the last day we Tony left and he said, this was great, guys. Let's do this again. As we start to think, we need to make this bigger film cause I think we also got the whole feedback from traveling with it going too many festivals. So we start to view the vibe and there is need for... there is market for that, and there is need for that. And we can have a voice actually by doing that. So, it's not a bad thing to try it. So, we end up... we kind of wrote another script to pitch that with it. We pitch actual idea to Tony LA. And he said, oh, this is great and actually end the paying us truly to sit and write the script and we wrote the first draft. And we start to find producers and to find investors. And some of them, one of the investor were actually from Syria. He lives in LA and the other company Distant Horizon, who's actually an American production house. So, they were very interested and it helped, of course having someone like Tony as a name who came in as a producer at this time and starting the feature. But there is that thing that, yeah, definitely we can tell this story, that short, we can make it a longer feature because there is so much to cover here and we end writing that script. And of course, it sounds so easy like that is not... yeah, it took us maybe two, three years to go there from 2003 to 2008 to get that future.

It was a successful winning best picture at the Madrid Film Festival in 2008, so congratulations on that. You've had some more recent films that have also gotten international acclaim and they seem to go a slightly different direction, maybe returning home a little bit. You had a fabulous film in 2010, A Cairo Exit, and then more recently, a film called The Price, both in Arabic. And this was a little bit more difficult. These are Egyptian stories that you're telling, and it's my understanding that the government of Egypt was not particularly helpful in the production or dissemination of at least one of these films.

It's true Cairo Exit was banned, still band actually, from media. Yeah, Cairo Exit, that's an interesting film because after I finish American East, American East took me to Egypt. I want to

for Cairo film festival and they like the film, and they put it in Cairo film festival and haven't been to Egypt since I came to America 1990. So, when I traveled back, Egypt has changed a lot from the 1990s. It was used a big shock for me. When I went back to with the movie with American East in the festival, it was... I started to feel, you know, Cairo is amazing. It's like a big set. If you can take the camera and put it and just turn it on in the street, there is so much drama so much going on here. You can form a story there, it would be great to show this energy of the city really. But it happened that the censorship refuse the script, because over there you have to send the script to censorship offices. They have to approve it before we get the permit to shoot in the street. So they have to approve the script, not just the movie, but the script actually. So the script, they have many comments. They said no, because I had a love story between a Christian and a Muslim. And even though it's not really, it's in the background of the story, but he said this too sensitive with issues now, and you can't do that. And of course, at the time I was still in the States, and said, what? What do you mean I can't do this? So we went and shot the film without permits. So that was a big no no for them and be... of course, it's illegal actually. And while we're shooting, they give us a hard time really. They start to find out and follow us. But we were shooting things as quick as possible. I went all this neighborhoods that nobody go there and the finishing the film but, it was hard to get made really... but actually after we finish it, they Just ban it totally from release to Egypt from being released in Asia but it did very well. And I think part of the marketing, they did the marketing for it because once you been a fill, people want to seethe.

They want to see what's being banned, absolutely. That was in 2010, more recently you've done The price, which is an interesting look, violence and the decisions that I make in the Middle East that was in 2015, just as we wrap up here. What's next for you? Any projects you're working on? Yeah.

I just finished shooting a film, it's called High Fancies, so its really about the society is being between gated community and non-gated community in those. It's kind of borders, almost the country split to... it's independent, and I think it has a fresh look at Cairo.

Wonderful. We will definitely look for that. Thank you so much for joining us.

Thank you for having me.

You have been listening to Rebecca Cruise's conversation with Hesham Issawi about his film work, how American film affected not only his career as a filmmaker and director, but also his perception of the United States – and how he has been motivated to alter the ways in which Muslims are portrayed in film.

For more information about Hesham Issawi and his films, visit our website at cisworldviews.com, where you can also leave a comment about this conversation.

We would always love to hear your thoughts and comments about this show. You can follow us on Facebook and Twitter @CISWorldViews – and you can follow me @suzettegrillot.

World Views @ CIS is produced by the College of International Studies at the University of Oklahoma. Kaitie Holland prepares our research and Jacque Braun produced this show. For all of us at the College of International Studies and the World Views program, and for Rebecca Cruise, I'm Suzette Grillot.