

Salma Shash Project Description

My dissertation project “*‘Umdas, Villagers, and Criminals: Law and Justice in Modern Egypt (1850-1914)*” explores the everyday life of justice in Egyptian villages through the multifaceted character of the *‘umda*, or village headman. The *‘umda* provides a unique entry point into the criminal justice system because of his liminal and intermediary position as a policing agent, a member of the village, a patriarch, a large landholder, and at times a criminal. “*‘Umdas, Villagers, and Criminals*” ties the questions of political economy and criminal justice together. Criminal justice shaped rural life and political economy. Conversely, land tenure, social composition, and rural hierarchy, shaped criminal justice. I use archival research, sensory and auditorial material, and oral history interviews to decenter and dislodge Cairo’s hegemony in informing us on justice and law. *‘Umdas* can redefine processes of criminality, policing, and punishment in modern Egypt. The question of *‘umdas* is one with present implications and stakes. Some families have retained the office since the nineteenth century. The *‘umudiyya* is a living institution that speaks to the political and social present.