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Portrait

Ulrike Freitag, Director of the Berlin Centre for the Modern Orient

For some months now she has been director of a research centre with 22 scholars on its staff, Professor of Islamic Studies at Berlin's Free University, and the mother of two children, just one and three years old. The 40 year-old historian, who previously taught at London's School of Oriental and African Studies, has four years to show that as a non-university institute Berlin's Centre for the Modern Orient meaningfully complements established research facilities. That is very much under discussion. The trial period for the hitherto little-known institute ends in 2007 and then an assessment will be carried out.

Ulrike Freitag is used to such a situation from her time in London. There specialists in Islamic Studies, historians, lawyers, political scientists, and geographers work together in the Middle East Department at the former colonial institute. A similar abundance of expertise is concerned with research into Africa, India, China – all in one building. Work at the Berlin centre is also interdisciplinary and comparative. The working conditions are good. There is enough money for research trips and foreign guests, no compulsion to teach, and little bureaucracy. So it is not surprising that universities are sometimes envious, even though all kinds of links mean that they can and should profit from the Centre.

Ever since she was a young girl Ulrike Freitag has travelled through the countries around the Indian Ocean, preferably alone. First in a shared taxi through Tunisia, to Egypt for a language course, to Syria for studies, to Yemen, Singapore, and Java on research trips. She says she feels



Photo: Zentrum Moderner Orient

safer on the streets of Damascus at night than in the centre of London. She has learned how to move around in these different worlds. Even where scarcely anything is possible any longer: in Saudi Arabia where women travelling on their own often don't get a visa, are not given a hotel room or allowed to rent a car, where there are separate universities for men and women, and where there is no public place for meeting male fellow historians.

"One can only understand the Orient with a loving heart". Ulrike Freitag responds to that declaration by Annemarie Schimmel, the recently deceased Grande Dame of Islamic Studies, with: "We also have a head". She is a different generation, a historian who keeps her distance from any religion, deploying rational concepts rather than grand gestures of acceptance and aspirations towards mediating cultural messages. Ulrike Freitag does not dispute that a basic sympathy for what is being researched is of course part of that. But for her scholarship is basically a question of attitude, no matter whether this involves particle physics, the Middle Ages, or Islam. She does not see her task as being to defend "the Orient", which does not exist in any unified sense, or to

mediate an all-embracing ideological assessment.

Ulrike Freitag prefers to work with Western-oriented researchers from Muslim countries, dismantles well-established stereotypes, puts an emphasis on historical contexts, and shows that a term like "Jihad" had different meanings at different times. Taken literally the word means "undertaking an effort". This concept has been divergently interpreted, morally and militarily. Ulrike Freitag seeks to deploy sober analysis so as to demonstrate that many applications of such terms are unfounded.

Scholars usually give more complicated answers than the public wants to hear. Ulrike Freitag and the Centre for the Modern Orient are not an exception. Basically she does not want to do more than sow doubts when a culture defines itself in terms of separation from others, preparing little packages of knowledge which are of use irrespective of ideologies. That is already quite a lot in times of turmoil like the present: scholarship as an anti-fundamentalist coolant – a cold cloth on a fevered forehead.

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