

Introduction

Saladin's Pilgrims and the War to End Wars

In 1898, as part of a grand tour of the realms of his Ottoman brother monarch, German Kaiser Wilhelm II visited the great Ottoman city of Damascus. To Wilhelm, Damascus was a city of Roman antiquity, of Saint Paul, and of Saladin. Especially Saladin. Salah al-Din Ibn Ayyub as he had been known in the Middle East, was the medieval sultan who had defeated and expelled the Crusaders from Jerusalem in 1187. Saladin's memory had been revived in a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works of popular literature published in German and English, satisfying a romantic thirst for stories of Oriental fantasy and adventure. Wilhelm II, perhaps more than other contemporary heads of state, crafted a self-consciously romantic public image and visual representation of his rule.¹ His visit to the Ottoman realms glamorized his notions of Roman imperial antiquity, medieval chivalry, the Crusades, and German imperial ascendance within a parade of romantic evocations.

Unlike Wilhelm, the Ottoman citizens of Damascus were not thinking of the ancient past, but of a promising future for their city and empire. Saladin's memory (and his modest tomb) was probably foremost among many, sometimes dimly, remembered sultans and princes. But for the citizens of the city, Wilhelm's visit represented their arrival on the world stage, and underscored the respect and importance, the city, its elite cosmopolitan citizens, and the Ottoman state under its sultan, hoped to enjoy. By all accounts they threw a party and reception for the ages to welcome Wilhelm. A century later the memory of the party survives in oral history among Damascenes. The following decades of revolution and war, culminating in the Great War of 1914–18, dashed the optimistic hopes of the dawn of the twentieth century.

The visit to the Ottoman realms so impressed Kaiser Wilhelm that he commissioned a number of lavish gifts for his friend Sultan Abdul-Hamid II and the Ottoman people. The gifts include the splendid gilded tile fountain still prominent in Istanbul's historic imperial center, a large

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marble plaque in the Baalbek Roman temple in today's Lebanon, and finally a beautiful gilded bronze wreath, almost one meter in diameter, made by the best German jewelers and metal smiths, which was sent to adorn the modest tomb of Saladin. The wreath read, in Arabic, "This crown was presented by His Majesty, the Emperor of Germany, eminence Wilhelm the Second in commemoration of his pilgrimage to the tomb of eminence Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi." For his part, Abdul-Hamid gave archeological gifts to Wilhelm that form the core of the collection of Berlin's Pergamum Museum, which, a century later, is Germany's most visited museum.

The Great War of 1914–18 ended the Ottoman state after seven centuries and ended the German monarchy of Wilhelm after forty-seven years. It also ended centuries of Russian and Hapsburg monarchy. In Damascus, the War brought the end of 402 years of mostly peaceful and prosperous Ottoman rule. Immediately after the fall of Damascus, another famous European visited Saladin's tomb. In the days after the British entry into the city and the retreat of the Ottoman army north toward Aleppo, and today's Turkish border, Colonel T.E. Lawrence, later known as Lawrence of Arabia, visited the site in the garden just outside the Umayyad Mosque in the old city. Lawrence had long been an enthusiast for the history of the Crusades and had visited the city, its monuments, and the tomb before, in summer 1909, as an Oxford undergraduate, when he spent three months on foot visiting the Crusader castles of Ottoman Syria. Lawrence titled the resulting thesis, "The Influence of the Crusades on European Military Architecture – to the End of the 12th Century," for which he received first-class honors.

On October 31, 1918 Lawrence returned not as a student, or as an archeologist, which he had been in 1912 and 1913, but as a new conqueror of an ancient, fabled city and empire. He seems to have envisioned himself a crusader or desert knight. Lawrence proceeded directly to the tomb of Saladin, where he took the heavy gilded bronze wreath and silk sash, carried it to his billet, and took it with him when he returned to England by ship a few days later. Back in London, Lawrence brought the trophy to the newly established Imperial War Museum, where it remains today. He attached a handwritten note with the donation, reading "as Saladin no longer required it."²

A month or so later, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George consented to the wish of his wartime counterpart French Premier Clemenceau for south eastern Anatolia, and the northern parts of Ottoman Syria including Beirut, Damascus, and Aleppo. By mid 1920 a French army marched east from Beirut to conquer and occupy the great city of Damascus and expel the once-British sponsored Arab government

Lawrence and Amir Faysal had set up in 1918. Immediately after claiming the city, another famous European soldier visited the tomb of Saladin.

In July 1920, French general and first High Commissioner for the French Mandates of Syria and Greater Lebanon, Henri Gouraud, made his first visit to the newly occupied city. Once in Damascus Gouraud went directly to the tomb of Saladin. In the garden outside the small tomb building, Gouraud delivered a speech in which he ignored the small crowd of anxious Damascene onlookers before him, and instead addressed Saladin directly, proclaiming, “arise Saladin, we have returned, and my presence here consecrates the victory of the Cross over the Crescent.”³

No less than Wilhelm, or Lawrence, General Gouraud was an important figure in the history of the Middle East in the century since the Great War and the end of the Ottoman state. General Gouraud, along with his secretary general, Robert de Caix, were the original colonial architects of political, legal, and governmental structures that still exert constant influence on the daily lives of millions of people of Syria and Lebanon. They, more than anyone, were the inventors of the states of Lebanon and Syria, as they exist today, and in a sense, the originators of conflicts that continue to afflict the people of the region.

Gouraud, Lawrence, or Wilhelm are not the focus of this book but their dreams and visions figure in it. It is instead the story of a collision, with effects that still reverberate, between an imperial fantasy world they shared, which melded ambitious, shifting imperial strategies and dreams of world domination, with fantasies of the past and present and a frequently outsized self-regard for their wisdom, abilities, and culture. Such fantastic visions collided with the forces and structures of an Ottoman authoritarian modernity, little different from ideologies of modernity, state patriotism and militarism that dominated all European Great War powers and roiled Europe's twentieth century. This is the story of the late Ottoman vanguard who gambled and lost. It is also the story of a tradition of Great Power politics in the Middle East, and the pervasive habit of the Great Powers to occupy a Middle East fantasy world of their own invention, with predictably tragic consequences. The three victorious powers that emerged from the war, Britain, France, and the United States, conspired to deny the political agency of Ottoman Muslims, and instead resolved to emphasize something then called the “national idea,” which endeavored to fragment the world into a multitude of small and manageable national states, arranged hierarchically and accorded rights of self-representation according to their level of “civilization,” or national development. The former Ottoman peoples occupied an intermediate place above Africans and well below

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Eastern European and Balkan Christians formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Middle Eastern historians have long been preoccupied with national histories and the rise of individual nationalisms. Modernity, ethnic nationalism, and the Middle East post-colonial nation-state are understood to be intertwined; a perspective that also lay behind the League of Nations and various post-World War I settlements.⁴ This book does not follow this pattern. It tries to imagine the viewpoint of many former Ottoman citizens who argued that the divisions of and governing arrangements of the post-Ottoman, colonial period were inferior, less free, and less representative than what had come before. Many protested that Ottoman rule had been better, more just, and perhaps more modern, than what we take to be the modern nation-state system of the Middle East. Their voices have been silenced by a hundred years of colonial and nationalist historiography, but if we want to know what was lost and what the world looked like in 1920, such voices are important. This book tells the story of the slow demise of a system of ordering the world that spanned centuries and regions and how people tried to survive this personal and political cataclysm. Obviously, many did not survive. The book takes as its frame of reference not the birth of something new, but the death of something old and evolving, and asks how did the old things, patterns, habits, cultures, ways of thinking, and possibilities affect what came after.

Loss from the collapse of the state and trauma from a decade of total war were the dominant experiences of the period. The modernizing Ottoman state, its system, its culture, and institutions had been increasingly present as backdrop in the lives of the people who lived through the decades surrounding the World War I. But by the early 1920s the state had disappeared from all its realms. Just as loss and disorientation were common experiences, so too was trauma and cataclysm that accompanied the decade of war at the end of the Ottoman years. In greater Syria as much as twenty-five percent of the population perished from war, famine, and disease between 1915 and 1919. These common experiences were shared and thus required little explicit explanation or discussion. Decades later we take this silence for inconsequence. This book argues the opposite; the cataclysm of war and the demise of the Ottoman state was so great it went without mention because of the ubiquitousness of the experience. No one escaped the suffering and no one needed to explain it.

This book is a history of an end, and a collapse so immense it has been forgotten and erased by near universal consensus. The book tries

to re-imagine the world of the Middle East as it might have seemed to a formerly optimistic and privileged person at the moment of its collapse into something different and all together less optimistic. For a hundred years, historians have interpreted the history of the twentieth century in the Middle East as the birth of this or that nation, the emergence of this or that state, the rise of this or that idea. By contrast, this is the story of the end of plans, hope, prospects, and horizons, and how people survived, and made sense of the events that had overtaken them. It is the story of the collapse of a state and its institutions and the certainties that had ordered life for millions for centuries, albeit certainly with constant change, but also with hope, occasional optimism, and collective effort. The book tries to tell this story in a way which I hope would have been familiar to those most affected, and in a modest way, to take a step toward settling some long overdue accounts.

Modernity, Militarism, and Colonialism in the Making of the Middle East

The modernizing Ottoman State had touched the lives of all within its domains in the years immediately before the war. Those who lived through the period shared a range of experiences common to all the major combatant states. The nineteenth-century European state had evolved in the century after the French revolution to become a state that educated, taxed, counted, conscripted, trained, and claimed to act in the name of, and derive its legitimacy from, the collective will and spirit of its population.⁵ The combatant states fostered a range of public rituals, origin stories, and invented traditions intended to cement loyalty, allegiance, and compliance with the state. In the Ottoman state these centered around Islam, the person and office of the Sultan-Caliph, or successor to the Prophet Muhammad as titular head of the Muslim community. The state also claimed to provide justice and representation to its non-Muslim population, who received quotas for representation in various elected Ottoman bodies. Like other states in Europe, state legitimation included a sometimes contradictory mix of majority religious appeals, claims of popular sovereignty, and claims of legal equality before the law for all religious communities. In this way the state sought to harness the loyalty of its majorities, while attempting more fitfully to insure the compliance of its religious minorities. The appeals to equality were often more theoretical than actual, as France's Dreyfus Affair of 1894, and the repression and mass killings of Ottoman Armenians about the same time demonstrate.

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The colonial legacy of today's Middle East is no better understood than the Ottoman legacy, and has often been ignored for similar reasons. The Great Powers, and various regional client states planned and discussed the partition of the Ottoman Empire long before the Balkan and Ottoman crises of 1911–13, and World War I. The partition plans, maneuvers, and negotiations were inevitably accompanied by a range of racial, religious, cultural, and civilizational oppositions. Put another way, a host of essential positive attributes claimed to characterize the British and French nations were arrayed against negative attributes claimed to characterize Ottoman Muslims; rationality against fanaticism, civilization against barbarism, evolutionism against timeless primitivism, modern against backward, and Christian against Muslim. These assumptions and preconceptions were not always openly expressed but they underlay all aspects of the post-world war settlement, and in fact made possible the kind of breathtaking hubris the settlement displayed. Notably, as Ottoman intellectuals pointed out at the time, such partitions and colonial arrangements were not contemplated or replicated in the conquered territories of the Hapsburg or German empires in central Europe. The difference was mostly religion, though so-called Oriental Christians, including Greeks and Armenians, were also considered unworthy of full self-rule.

Legacies

This book makes three central arguments: First, the common legacy of the late Ottoman modernization project is second only to the colonial legacy in shaping the history of the region and its peoples. Second, the colonial legacy on the Middle East is a common experience, whether in Palestine, Iraq, Syria, or Turkey, without which the history of the region is incomprehensible. And finally, the durable tendency to view the history of the region through the lens of national histories of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, etc. obscures commonalities that were clear to all until at least the 1940s.

The book begins with a chapter examining the common structures, themes, and experiences of late Ottoman life. It focuses on the formative experience of military school, and follows the life experiences and adventures of several late Ottoman figures who began life as provincial children, of mostly modest background, and attended subsidized elite state schools. As members of a self-conscious, meritocratic, state elite, together they experienced privilege and responsibility for the fate of the state, war and trauma, followed by defeat, unemployment, prison, and worse, and went on to emerge as statesmen, nation builders, activists,

or revolutionaries. The chapter shows that late Ottoman attitudes and structures were formative on the decades that followed, despite the collapse and disappearance of the state. The modernizing Ottoman state broadly shared similar institutions and attitudes with other modernizing European powers, and the Ottoman state and its fate deserves a more central place in the history of Europe and World War I than it customarily receives.

The second chapter examines the theories and practices of post-world war colonialism, as practiced by the victorious powers on the territories of the vanquished. It examines the legal and racial structures and theories that legitimated colonial rule over formerly independent peoples. Part of the effort to colonize the Ottoman realms required a rhetorical removal of the Ottoman state from the story of Europe, and the tacit placement of Ottoman Muslims into racially deficient non-European categories that demanded colonial tutelage. The resulting inconsistencies at the core of the colonial and League of Nations mandate system had consequences for the post-Ottoman region and its people that are still unfolding one hundred years later. The chapter introduces readers to the general themes and narrative of interwar Middle Eastern colonialism, which are explored in more detail in subsequent sections.

The remaining chapters follow the adventures and struggles of the last Ottoman generation through the interwar decades. These chapters make the central argument that for those who lived through them, the borders, states, and national histories that characterize the usual framework for understanding the region would have made no sense. The book attempts to re-imagine a post-Ottoman Middle East of great cities, and rural and pastoral hinterlands, interconnected through modern infrastructure, and institutions, undivided by borders, ruling arrangements, or the constructed barriers of human consciousness.

A century later, the poisonous fruit of the Middle East colonial settlement is still in the headlines. Almost one hundred years after the end of the Great War, one of the Middle Eastern states created in its wake, Syria, where this book was first conceived, is in an advanced state of civil war and social and political disintegration. The conflict is widely claimed to be the gravest humanitarian and refugee crisis since World War II. The roots of the conflict in Syria today, like many other regional conflicts, reach directly into the polluted soil sown by the post-War settlement, and my only optimistic hope is that the reader may discern the shadows of these roots, and know that the suffering of today did not come from nowhere, but from the conviction, still nurtured widely, that some people were more deserving of life and liberty than others simply

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by the accident of their birth, and that the people who have suffered most from this conviction, now and in the past, did nothing to deserve their awful inheritance.

Notes

1. Peter Schamoni makes this argument in his documentary based on historical footage of Wilhelm's reign in his *Majestät brauchen Sonne: Kaiser Wilhelm II. - der erste deutsche Medienstar*, 2000.
2. Lowell Thomas, *With Lawrence in Arabia* (New York: Garden City Publishing, 1924), p. 291, www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30083872, accessed July 1, 2015, and correspondence with Mrs. Jane Furlong, Imperial War Museums.
3. Pierre La Mazière, *Partant pour la Syrie* (Paris: Audinière, 1928), p. 191.
4. The excellent recent book, Michael A Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: the Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908–1918* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 17–18, makes this point well.
5. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (New York: Vintage, 1987), Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1909* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998).

1 Ottoman Modernity in the Long Nineteenth Century: Training State Servants and Making Citizens

Events in the Final Ottoman Decades

1839–76	Ottoman legal and governmental reforms, including legal equality, state education, local, and provincial elections, etc.
1876	Ottoman Constitution
1876–1909	Sultan Abdul-Hamid II
1877	Sultan Abdul-Hamid II dissolves constitutional assembly
1877–8	Russo-Ottoman War in Balkans
1878	Congress of Berlin introduces the “national idea” to international settlements and partition plans. Great Power sponsorship of client “nations” was thought to limit the possibility of direct Great Power annexations, and direct conflict
1882–1956	British invasion and occupation of Ottoman Egypt
1870s–1890s	Mass expansion of Ottoman state education
1908	Ottoman army forces Ottoman Constitutional Restoration
1909	Failed Counter-Revolution causes abdication of Sultan Abdul-Hamid
1911	Italian invasion of Tripoli province (Libya)
1912–13	First and Second Balkan Wars
June 28, 1914	Heir to Hapsburg throne assassinated in former-Ottoman provincial capital Sarajevo. Resulting ultimatums start World War I

Modern Education and a Late Ottoman Childhood

At the end of the nineteenth century a 10-year-old boy began a long walk away from home. He kissed his mother, perhaps for the last time, cried a little, and left, carrying some belongings, carefully packed for the journey, accompanied by his father, an uncle, or older brother. They soon passed beyond beloved and familiar sights, through unfamiliar villages, or neighborhoods, over the passage of hours, or even days. Finally they reached the grand doorway of a large stone building, with an inscription neither could likely read, bearing the signature of the Ottoman sultan, and reading “Imperial Military Middle School.” The boy kissed his father, perhaps cried a bit more, but furtively, and passed through the doorway into the seemingly durable embrace of the modernizing state.

Attending a state middle school was an experience of anxiety and wonder for children in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire. In Damascus, Beirut, Adana, Salonica, and other provincial capitals, the journey to school started by leaving the family home. The path might have taken the parent and child through olive groves, fruit orchards, or wheat fields, and neighboring villages, and down the mountains, toward a town nestled on the shores of the Mediterranean, or along a large river. It would surely have been the largest town, and probably the largest building, the boy had ever seen. Anxiety and dread gave way to excitement and pride when the boy received his splendid new woolen uniform, complete with brass buttons bearing the imperial coat of arms, and a crimson fez.

In the nineteenth century in Europe and the Mediterranean basin, most people were peasants and most died not far from their birthplace. It would not have taken the child long to realize that his life was about to change in a way different from the lives of his parents or grandparents. Education and association with the state would indeed open new vistas on a world beyond the village or neighborhood. School would be jarring, eased by new friends, and a dormitory full of boys just as alone and disoriented. Teachers spoke unfamiliar languages and new words, and there would surely be a huge and frightening quantity of things to learn. Military or civil middle school would, however, be the first real step in becoming part of a late Ottoman elite, and children would meet peers with whom they would share experiences and outlook over the coming decades. Everything they learned and did conditioned them to believe they were the foremost guardians of the Ottoman state, its sultan, and its Muslim people. They came to form a self-conscious elite and expected to assume leading roles in the army and politics. Similarly conditioned men played singular roles in all the countries that marched to war in 1914. In the former Ottoman lands, they continued their central role after the defeat in 1918.