Introduction

Two recent events illustrate the ambivalent space that the Ottoman Empire occupies in the historical imagination of Arabs living in the twenty-first century. In January 2002 Saudi developers razed Qasr Ajyad, an Ottoman-era fortress that had stood watch over Mecca for two centuries. They envisioned in its place a hotel with splendid views of the holy city that would provide luxurious surroundings for wealthier pilgrims and visitors. The decision to demolish the fortress was unproblematic from a Saudi perspective. Qasr Ajyad was of a recent vintage when compared to other Middle Eastern historical monuments, and there was no local outcry for its preservation. Nonetheless, İstemihan Talay, Turkey's minister of culture, compared its leveling to the Taliban's wanton destruction of the statues of the Buddha in Bamiyan in the previous year. With popular outrage growing at home over what was portrayed in the Turkish media as a slight to the honor of the nation, Minister Talay requested that UNESCO condemn the Saudi action as it had the obliteration of the "world heritage" site in Afghanistan. Arab commentators, in contrast, were dismissive of the protests, which they ascribed to a residual bitterness on the part of the Turks that their ancestors had lost control of the Arabian Peninsula in 1918. In the end, UNESCO decided that as the fortress was not on its list of places that merited preservation, its fate was a matter solely within the purview of the Saudi authorities.

Eight years later, Israeli soldiers stormed the freighter *Mavi Marmara* in international waters on 31 May 2010. In the process, they killed eleven people, all of whom were Turkish nationals. A Muslim charity in Turkey had hired the boat as a part of a flotilla manned by Turkish, European, and North American activists to transport medical supplies

and building materials to the blockaded Gaza Strip. Turkey's tough verbal and political response to the killing of its citizens by the Israeli Defense Forces evoked an outpouring of pro-Turkish sentiment in the Arab media. With his public scolding of Israeli leaders on several occasions, the Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, emerged as the hero of the day on the "Arab Street." Erdoğan, buoyed by his newly found popularity among his neighbors to the south, was in the forefront of world leaders who urged the Arab regimes to listen to their people's demand for political reform during the "Arab Spring" of 2011. Accompanying this flexing of Turkish political muscle in the region, some commentators in the Arab media remarked that the growing relationship between Arabs and Turks in the spheres of trade and international politics was positive. More than one noted that it marked a restoration of ties between the two peoples, who had drifted apart since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The differing responses to the two incidents arose out of the complex web of relationships that linked the Ottoman dynasty with its Arab subjects and how the empire's historical legacy has been configured by successive generations of Arab intellectuals since its fall from the world stage.

Ottoman political and cultural influences were pervasive in the southern and eastern littoral regions of the Mediterranean Sea for four centuries from the start of the sixteenth century until World War I. Twentieth-century Arab historians, however, rarely presented the Ottoman period in a positive light. For most of that century, Arab nationalism was the dominant political discourse. Arab historians working within that rhetorical construct reduced the Arab peoples' past to an uncomplicated equation: the Turks were the masters; the Arabs were their subjects. The Arabs' struggle for independence from the European powers in the wake of World War I helped to conflate the defunct Ottoman regime with later European imperial interventions in the region. This created a persuasive narrative of foreign oppression that commenced with the Mongol destruction of Baghdad in 1258 and continued until the revolutionary era of Gamal Abdul-Nasser.[1]

Within that metahistory, the Ottomans were located in a continuum of conquerors, despoilers, and oppressors whom the Arab peoples had endured. As nationalist historians viewed the Ottoman Empire as an alien

[1] Muhammad Kurd ʿAli, *Khitat al-sham*, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Qalam, 1969–72); Satiʿ al-Husri, *al-Bilad al-ʿarabiyya wa al-dawla al-ʿuthmaniyya* (Beirut: Dar al-ʿIlm lil-Milayin, 1960).

occupier in the Arab lands, it seemed obvious to them that their ancestors would have felt the same way.[2] Countering the nationalist narratives, Arab scholars and others began in the 1970s to reexamine the Ottoman centuries, using archival sources largely ignored by an earlier generation of historians. These include the records of the Islamic (sharia) courts in the Arab cities as well as the chancellery documents relating to the Arab provinces located in Istanbul. As a result, a more nuanced understanding of the history of Ottoman rule in the Arab lands is emerging.[3] The findings and arguments developed by those historians over the past four decades inform my analysis in this work.

EMPIRE: METROPOLE AND PERIPHERY

In the past decade, historians have expanded the definition of empire. Earlier generations of historians took the Roman Empire as an historical paradigm and posited that empires required a network of control extending from the center, or metropole, over a diverse population that was maintained by a bureaucratic state and enforced by an army. To qualify as an empire, the metropole had ideally to exercise power over multiple subject peoples, who were typically, but not always, culturally distinct from their rulers and from each other. No longer as interested in the "great men" of history who created empires, historians have more recently preferred to pursue the question of what mechanisms – political, ideological, cultural, and so on – maintained empires after the initial conquests. As the historian of Rome Clifford Ando asks in a series of related questions: "What made Roman power persuasive or even attractive to the population of the provinces? What rendered provincial cultures permeable to Roman paradigms for the legitimate exercise of government? In short, what induced quietude rather than rebellion?" [4] Other scholars have focused their attention on related issues to understand the dynamics of control employed by "empires," of varying complexities and definitions, to elicit their subjects' acquiescence. It took more than power to maintain an empire; it also required some level of collaboration on the

[2] ᶜAbdallah Hanna, *Harakat al-ᶜamma al-dimashqiyya fi al-qarnayn al-thamin ᶜashar wa al-tasiᶜ al-ᶜashar: namudhaj li-hayat al-mudun fi dhill al-iqtaᶜiyya al-sharqiyya* (Beirut: Dar ibn Khaldun, 1985).

[3] ᶜAdel Mannaᶜ, *Ta'rikh filastin fi awakhir al-ᶜahd al-ᶜuthmani: qira'a jadida* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya, 1999).

[4] Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 5.

part of its subjects.[5] This study contributes to that ongoing discussion by exploring how the Arab subjects of the Ottoman sultans viewed their relationship to the extraordinary metropole that was Istanbul.

Whatever definition one might choose for empire, there is a consensus among historians that the Ottoman state was one. Although Europeans contemporary with the Ottoman Empire labeled it as such, those at the sultan's court preferred to think of their state as "the well-protected domains" (*diyar-ı mahrusa*) or "the Ottoman kingdoms" (*memalik-i osmaniye*). Their ambition was for a political organization that transcended the petty notion of kingdom in a larger vision that they felt they shared with earlier states that had straddled the globe. The titles that some of the sultans took – *Cihangir* (World Grabber), *Alampenah* (Refuge of the Universe) – gave voice to that conceit. In their own estimation, they were world conquerors to be feared and obeyed.

In imagining their place in history, those at the sultan's court invoked historical precedents. Kritovoulos, a Greek historian of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, explicitly compared Sultan Mehmed to Alexander the Great.[6] Others at court expanded the comparison of the sultans to great leaders of the past, including the pre-Islamic Persian shahs, Byzantine emperors, Chingiz Khan, and the Abbasid caliphs.[7] The Ottoman elite understood all but the last exemplar to have been secular, that is, not condoned by Islamic traditions, and therefore supportive of an absolutist ideology that posited the sultan as both the source of legislation and the sole arbiter of justice. The precedent of the caliphate was more problematic as an expression of absolutism, however, as it left open the possibility that the corporate body of Muslim religious scholars, the ulama, might ultimately decide the definition of justice, even as they acknowledged that it was the sultan's prerogative to dispense it.

Such a limitation on sultanic authority was still a long way from being an early form of constitutionalism as the scholarly consensus among the

[5] Among others: Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (London: Allen Lane, 2002); Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture, and Conquest in the East 1750–1850* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005); Timothy Parsons, *The Rules of Empires: Those Who Built Them, Those Who Endured Them, and Why They Always Fall* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

[6] Kritovoulos, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, translated by Charles Riggs (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), 3.

[7] Cornell Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa Ali* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 253–92.

empire's religiously trained intellectuals agreed with the formula ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad that "forty years of tyranny is preferable to one night of anarchy." Nonetheless, arguments by the leading ulama against policies that the sultan had decreed did at times create tension in the Ottoman court.[8] Present in the model of the caliphate was an acknowledgment that the political legitimacy of the ruler rested on Islamic legal precedents and traditions. While that formulation created problems for a sultan wishing to exercise his will with unfettered restraint, the argument that the legitimacy of the House of Osman was vested in Islamic notions of sovereignty and justice could produce a positive response from the majority of his Arab subjects. Going back to the questions raised by Ando for the Romans, it was the state's appeal to those traditions that helped secure Ottoman rule in the Arab lands.

Arab nationalist historians were correct to assert that their ancestors had been subjects of the Ottoman sultan, but they were less persuasive when it came to establishing the nature of that relationship. Ottoman armies conquered Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, Wallachians, Hungarians, Albanians, Kurds, and Anatolian Turks, as well as Arabs, reducing all to being subject peoples. Few communities voluntarily chose to submit to Ottoman rule. After the conquests, all of the sultan's subjects were ruled by an elite class of Ottoman officials who seldom had a deep concern for, or knowledge of, local conditions. The Ottoman regime equally exploited all of its subjects, the *reaya* (literally, the flock), for the revenues they might produce and considered them to be a largely undifferentiated mass of taxpayers. Exploitation and coercion went hand in hand to establish and maintain the Ottoman Empire, as was the case with other empires. At the same time, however, its survival over time required the cooptation and collaboration of at least some of the subject peoples. In that regard, the invocation of Islam as a political ideology was crucial as far as many Arabs were concerned.

The majority of the Arabs living within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire were Sunni Muslims. That was also true for the Kurds, Albanians, Bosniaks, and Turks. In the early modern period, religious faith usually trumped an ethnic identity for most peoples' collective self-definition. As such, the relationship of any of the Sunni Muslim peoples to the Ottoman state was presumably more complex than that of the empire's Christian subjects in the Balkans. Christians could view the Ottomans

[8] Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 46–72.

as both conquerors and infidels. For many, there remained hope for a restoration of the Christian kingdoms that the Crescent had overturned. To feel a true sense of community with the Ottoman state, it has been suggested that a Christian in the Balkans had to convert to Islam.[9] Christine Philliou's recent study of the Phanariot Greeks in the service of the House of Osman in the early nineteenth century has challenged that reading as a projection backward of later nationalist sentiments for at least some Ottoman Christians.[10] Whether Balkan Christians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries viewed the Ottomans solely as oppressors is yet to be established, however.[11] What is certain is that their contemporaries among Sunni Muslim Arabs, or at least those who have left us with a written record, did not describe themselves as an occupied people.

The Arab chroniclers who witnessed the actual conquests depicted the Ottomans as foreigners, but there was also much about them that was familiar. The first public act that Sultan Selim (1512–20) performed after conquering Aleppo, Damascus, and Cairo was to lead the faithful in prayer in the Friday mosque of each city, and that action was noted by some of the chroniclers with approbation. It met, after all, their expectation of what a Muslim sovereign should do. The sultan whose name was mentioned in those prayers had changed, but the act of naming a ruler who pledged himself to uphold the political and religious dominance of Islam had not. The Ottoman conquest did not signal a radical overturn of the social order in the Arab lands as it simply replaced one reigning sultan with another. As such, there were few among the Arabic-speaking Sunni populations after 1516–17 who sought a restoration of the old regime or questioned the legitimacy of the Ottoman sultan to rule them.

The same claim could probably be made for the other Sunni Muslim populations that were the sultan's subjects. There was, however, an important difference between the Arabs and other Muslims. The Arabs were heirs to a highly developed literary, political, and religious culture that did not always conform to the culture present at the Ottoman court. Ottoman Turkish would serve as the written language used by the

[9] Maria Todorova, "The Ottoman Legacy in the Balkans." In *Imperial Legacy: The Ottoman Imprint on the Balkans and the Middle East*, edited by L. Carl Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996): 45–77.

[10] Christine Philliou, *Biography of an Empire: Governing Ottomans in an Age of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

[11] Johann Strauss makes a tentative step toward addressing that question. Johann Strauss, "Ottoman Rule Experienced and Remembered: Remarks on Some Local Greek Chronicles of the *Tourkokratia*." In *The Ottomans and the Balkans: A Discussion of Historiography*, edited by Fikret Adanır and Suraiya Faroqhi. (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 193–221.

Muslim elites throughout the Balkans and Anatolia, regardless of the language they spoke at home. In the Ottoman Arab lands, only a few apparently bothered to learn it in the first three centuries of Ottoman rule. Their cultural inheritance gave the Arabs a perspective on their rulers that was multilayered. The Ottoman sultans and their servants at court were undeniably fellow Muslims. Yet their interpretations of a shared religious heritage were not necessarily the same as those held by the Arab Sunni intellectual elite. The individuals who constituted that class had, therefore, to negotiate a place for themselves within the empire. They acknowledged the right of the Ottoman dynasty to their political allegiance, but they retained a supreme confidence in their role as guardians of a distinct cultural heritage that was, in their view, the equal of if not actually superior to that of the sultan and his court in Istanbul.

Depending on one's historical perspective, the Arabs can be configured as a subject people of the empire, which they were, or as collaborators in the imperial project. It is the latter interpretation that this study advances. The degree of that collaboration, however, could vary. Many Muslim Bosniaks and Albanians played an active role in the governance of the empire and constituted a reservoir of manpower in the early modern period that Ottoman officials could rely on to supplement the janissary units for the empire's armies both in the Balkans and in Asia. Furthermore, there were Muslim scholars who began their careers in the Balkans but who served the empire throughout its far-flung dominions, including in the Arab lands. With their service to "faith and state" (*din ve devlet*), these Balkan Muslims played an auxiliary role within the empire not unlike that of the Scots in the British Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[12] In contrast, Arabs did not die for the empire in large numbers before 1877, the year in which Arab conscripts were pressed into the empire's war with Russia. Yet most Arabic-speaking Sunni intellectuals acknowledged that the rule of the Ottoman sultan was legitimate in the earlier centuries, and they prayed for his victory over the empire's enemies. They were the empire's ideological cheerleaders, although admittedly their support was rarely tested. When the sultan did need their moral backing after the Wahhabi capture of the holy cities of Arabia in the early nineteenth century, however, their written responses were unanimously on the side of the House of Osman.

[12] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 117–32.

There were multiple reasons why Arabs might choose to acquiesce to Ottoman rule rather than seek to overturn it. In the Ottoman Empire as in all other state systems in the early modern period, the ruler had the capacity to apply coercive force to compel his subjects to accept his rule. The application of military force was, however, not a common occurrence in the Arab cities during the Ottoman centuries. While the Ottomans had to mobilize their garrisons in the Arab lands to combat the raids of tribal peoples or the insurrections of clans that enjoyed the protection of highland redoubts, there was little need to use those forces against urban populations. Most outbreaks of urban unrest that did occur were, in fact, mounted by the putative enforcers of the sultan's rule, the janissaries.

The virtual absence of rebellion among urban Arabs can be explained by a number of factors. In the first century after the conquest, the merchant class prospered under the *pax ottomana*. In the nineteenth and early twentieth, the large landowners in the Arab provinces who were urban based had an economic interest in the continuity of the status quo, as the empire had created the opportunities for their acquisition of land, wealth, and status. The duration of Ottoman rule in the Arab lands also depended, however, upon the legitimacy extended to the sultan by the Sunni religious scholars and the willing collaboration of a relatively small group of elite local families, the *aʿyan*, who mediated the political and social balance between the welfare of their fellow townsmen and the needs of the central state. The acknowledgment and acceptance of the House of Osman's right to rule them by both sets of actors, who were often related by ties of blood or marriage, secured a large swath of territory for the empire in periods when the sultan did not have the resources to wield the blunt force necessary to do the job himself.

Of all the reasons why the Arab elites might view the Ottoman state as serving their interests, none was more compelling than that of their shared religious identity. The perception that the fates of Islam as a community of believers and of the Ottoman Empire as a political state were unalterably linked is a thread that runs through the various works composed by Sunni Arab authors in the early modern period. That confidence was no longer universally shared by authors writing in Arabic in the late nineteenth century as the empire ceased to be synonymous with security and constructed political identities based on ethnicity rather than religious faith began to emerge in the public discourse.

Scholars have noted that those authors whose works have survived from the early Ottoman centuries constituted only a small community whose opinions did not necessarily reflect those of anyone outside their

close-knit circle of friends and relatives.[13] That is probably true as the elites in any society speak only for themselves. There were, of course, exceptions – chronicles written by those outside that elite circle: a barber in one case, men in the military in both Cairo and Damascus, and even a few Christians.[14] The dominant voice that has survived from the early Ottoman centuries is nonetheless that of the Sunni learned class, and its representatives spoke largely in unison. All the authors consulted for this study were city dwellers who were extremely proud of their respective cities' historical past and conscious of the place of the Ottoman sultans in a long line of Muslim rulers. If not wealthy themselves, they were in sympathy with those individuals whom they viewed as the *khassa* or the *khawass*, the social elite. They viewed their poorer neighbors as forming an indiscriminate rabble (*awbash, ghawgha'*, *sifla*) who were perhaps a step up the social ladder above tribal pastoralists and peasants, but just barely so. The authors were all males, who rarely mentioned women. They also seldom, if ever, took note of the non-Muslims who might share their urban space. Despite those obvious drawbacks, I have turned to their works as a major source for my understanding of the era. We are left with few alternatives to answer the crucial question of what Arabs, albeit a small sample of them, thought about the Ottomans, if indeed that question can ever be satisfactorily answered. A limited sample of opinion, heavily weighted in favor of the religious establishment, is still better than no sample at all.

Largely on the basis of those sources, this study highlights the historical experience of the Sunni Muslim populations in the Ottoman Arab provinces. The non-Muslims were the subject of an earlier volume in which I discussed how their collective identities changed over time.[15] In writing that book, I was faced with the larger question of how Muslim Arabic speakers might have configured their place in the Ottoman Empire in which Islam was arguably the dominant political ideology. I could not help but notice that religion was in the forefront of the discourse that ran through the narratives composed by Arabic speakers, whether Muslim or Christian, in the Ottoman centuries.

[13] Nelly Hanna, *In Praise of Books: A Cultural History of Cairo's Middle Class: Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press 2003), 12–15.

[14] Bruce Masters, "The View from the Province: Syrian Chroniclers of the Eighteenth Century" *JAOS* 114 (1994): 353–62; Michael Winter, "Historiography in Arabic during the Ottoman Period." In *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, edited by Roger Allen and D. S. Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 194–210.

[15] Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

I acknowledge that there was perhaps a cynical use of religion as a political ideology by both the Ottoman officials and the Arab Sunni intellectual elite. It made governing the Arab lands easier for the sultan as it gave him legitimacy in a society that was wedded to a belief in a social hierarchy that God had ordained. For the Arabic-speaking Sunni elite, Islam provided a crucial link to the state, with the unspoken possibility of financial and political patronage. It also provided a justification for their acquiescence to Ottoman rule. Nonetheless, I believe religious faith and solidarity were also present in the works. Furthermore, the authors' commitment to Islam as their personal faith helps us to understand the political worldview that served as the bedrock of their relationship to those who ruled them.

THE ARABS IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

P. M. Holt published his ground-breaking survey of Ottoman Arab history, *Egypt and the Fertile Crescent 1616–1922: A Political History*, in 1966.[16] As suggested by the subtitle, it concentrated on the region's political history and provided little discussion of economic or social developments. Holt based his narrative primarily on local chronicles in Arabic, supplemented by accounts written by European travelers and diplomats. Using many of those same sources, his student Abdul-Karim Rafeq published *al-ᶜArab wa al-ᶜuthmaniyyun, 1516–1916* (The Arabs and the Ottomans) in 1974, the first work in Arabic to explore comprehensively the Arab experience in the Ottoman Empire without a strong ideological bias.[17] Both authors' works have held up well over time and no subsequent study has significantly altered their complimentary narratives of the Ottoman past. I do not attempt to do so here. Since their publication, a number of scholars inspired by the pioneering work by Rafeq in the Islamic court records of Syria and by André Raymond in those of Cairo have explored the surviving sharia records of the various Arab cities to explore issues concerning the social and economic history of the region that were largely neglected in the sources used by Holt.[18] Research

[16] P. M. Holt, *Egypt and the Fertile Crescent 1616–1922: A Political History* (London: Longmans Green, 1966).

[17] Abdul-Karim Rafeq, *al-ᶜArab wa al-ᶜuthmaniyyun, 1516–1916* (Damascus: Matbaᶜ Alif Ba, 1974).

[18] For a collection of Rafeq's articles based on the sijills, see, ᶜAbd al-Karim Rafiq, *Dirasat iqtisadiyya wa ijtimaᶜiyya fi ta'rikh bilad al-sham al-hadith* (Damascus: Maktabat Nubil, 2002); André Raymond, *Artisans et commerçants au Caire au XVIIIᵉ siècle*, 2 vols. (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1973–74).