

A New Historiography on the Ottoman Arab and Eastern Provinces

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The Arabs of the Ottoman Empire, 1516-1918: A Social and Cultural History

By Bruce Alan Masters

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 271 pages, \$31.48, ISBN: 9781107619036.

Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands: Making a Boundary, 1843-1914

By Sabri Ateş

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 366 pages, \$99.00, ISBN: 9781107033658.

War and State Formation in Syria: Cemal Pasha's Governorate During World War I, 1914-1917

By M. Talha Çiçek

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Beginning in the early 1980s, a number of works were published on the Arab provinces. These works criticized nationalistic approaches that treated the Ottomans similarly to Western colonial powers and blamed them for much of the violence that took place in the 19th and 20th century. The main accomplishment of these writings was the reintegration of the Ottoman past into the history of the modern Middle East. Nationalist historiography of Middle Eastern countries places the end of the Ottoman period with the arrival of Napoleon in Egypt in 1798. According to this historiography, the

local elites played a dominant role in the modern period, as founders of the modern Middle East nations such as Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan, Tunus, and Algeria, operating solely within a local “proto-nationalist” environment with no indication of influence from other events taking place within the Ottoman Empire as a whole.¹

Recent works in the last couple of decades, which do not completely ignore this nationalist historiography but refute some of its approaches, have started to pick up on the concept of Albert Hourani's ‘politics of nota-

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bles' and have showed the influence of local Ottoman elites in the history of the Arab regions.² For instance, Philip Khoury's work on urban Damascene notables attempts to give a balanced interpretation to the rise of Arab nationalism in Syria.³ Khoury explains how long-term Ottoman reforms, commercialization in agrarian relations, and European economic penetration helped merge a few influential families into an upper class elite that would eventually lead local politics in Syria after 1860. Another work that is noteworthy to mention is the study by David Commins on the Damascene *ulama* in late 19th century Ottoman Syria.⁴ Commins' book explores the tension between the Salafis and traditional *ulama* through unpublished manuscripts, correspondence, and inheritance documents of three generations of a notable Damascus family. In addition to tensions with the *ulama*, Arabism was on the rise among young men with secular education who sought the advancement of Arab interests in the Ottoman Empire.

Many nationalist works tend to use documents and "indigenous" literature to argue that Middle East states had pre-existing nationalist sentiments. For example, Arab and Egyptian nationalists have used Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti's work and other Arab narratives for such purposes. Arab nationalist works also tend to focus on the historical period after 1800, using local archival documents as well as British and French primary and secondary sources. The divide between Turkish and Arab schol-

arship is threatening to place the efforts of historians such as Albert Hourani in danger. Decades before, Hourani placed the Ottomans within the context of Arab history without prejudice. A handful of scholars from modern Arab nations claim that Arabic sources alone are sufficient for the historiography of Ottoman Arab lands and that works based on these sources alone are more authentic and faithful to the Arab people than those that include Ottoman sources. Therefore, there is very little work in the Arab world that relies mostly on the Ottoman sources such as *Kadi Sijills*, or Islamic court records.⁵

The nationalist Arab historian will probably stay for a long time dissatisfied about their past during the Ottoman period. On the other hand, the question of "what induced quietude rather than rebellion?"⁶ in the Arab lands of the Ottoman Empire still remains unanswered and thus leaves out a big chunk of the common history lived together. A similar question has been asked about the Roman Empire's administration for centuries over its provinces. Masters adopts the same line of questioning throughout the book and presents solid arguments in his efforts to find answers. The query becomes more legitimate since the Ottomans refer to the past experiences of the Byzantine Empire in the Balkans and Anatolia as well as the Mamluk rule in the Arab territories.

Masters' work is timely in the context of intensified discussions over a model for the post-Arab Spring. Besides focusing on the social, econom-

ic, and political evaluation of each Arab province, mostly in the Middle East region of the Ottoman Empire, Masters skillfully gives a synopsis on the life and times of some of the prominent Arab scholars and elites in the 19th century.

The book emphasizes that the Arab people, more specifically the notables, are “collaborators in the imperial project” (p. 7) rather than being passive subjects of the new order. Masters’ exclusivist approach to the Arab notables and his suggestion of their difference from the rest of the elites, in the other parts of the Empire, is not based on well established arguments since he only refers to a few studies on the notables in the Balkan and Anatolian provinces and Kurdistan. He points to two groups that conveyed the unequivocal message of the sultan in times of the need to cooperate with the Ottoman administration and thus were incorporated into the Ottoman polity: the *ulama*, or Sunni religious scholars, and the *a’yan*, or local elite families. The *ulama* helped the sultan to establish his legitimacy among his new subjects while the *a’yan* provided a social and political balance between the common people and the House of Osman in Istanbul. Despite such collaboration, there were differences between the master and the subjects. Masters underscores the importance of the language barrier and he brings it up throughout the book. Though this obstacle was somewhat overcome through the rhetoric that comprised mostly the Islamic doctrine, which both sides understood and used as a medium (p. 48). Besides language

variances, as a partial obstacle, there was a theological disagreement about the status of the sultan/caliphate. Until the nineteenth century, the Arab subjects of the sultan, especially the *ulama*, as well as the Kurds,⁷ did not accept that the title of the caliphate was transferable to the sultan since he was not a descendent of the Prophet (p. 54).

Masters’ book may be useful for upper-division Arab history and survey classes in college, as the title suggests. However, one should not forget that it is not a solid history of the Arab people, rather it is comprised of several articles on specific topics, some of which were previously published. Still, the work is a very good one and could be assigned as a required reading for classes on Middle East history. The political events such as the arrival of the Ottoman rule into the Arab lands, the establishment of the provincial administration, the war with Napoleon and Mehmet Ali Pasha in Egypt, the struggle with the Wahhabis, the road paved towards the Tanzimat reforms, and finally the reaction to the rule of the Young Turks take more than two thirds of the book, despite the subtitle of the book suggests that it is a social and cultural history of the Arab people. Moreover, the coverage of these themes is not uniform and even. The social and cultural chapters, which make up two out of seven chapters, are about the economic and social life in the early modern period and the intellectual-mostly religious scholars- life of these provinces, whereas the rest focuses on the political developments

in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Once in a while, Masters gets into the details of specific discussions, which may not be easy to follow for the readers who are not familiar with scholarly works on the topics.

In addition, the regional survey is uneven. The book's focus is mostly on Syria, especially the last four chapters, as well as Lebanon and Egypt, which are the author's areas of specialization. There is much less on Iraq, the Hijaz and even less on the North African provinces.

The book covers four centuries of the Arab people under the Ottomans, thus could be employed as a textbook, however it lacks maps, photographs, figures and timelines. Another weakness is in the occasional mistakes in punctuation and spelling errors of the Ottoman Turkish words. The author uses mostly ü for u or û and vice versa such as *ülema* (p. 83) instead of *ulema*, *Hürşid Paşa* (p. 140) instead of *Hurşid Pasha*, *Hülefâ-yı Abbasiye* (p. 146) instead of *Hulefâ-yı Abbasiye* (Abbasi Caliphs), *mütesarrıfiye* (p. 182) instead of *mutasarrıfiye*, *duşman-ı din* (p. 146) instead of *düşman-ı din* (enemy of the faith), as well as ı for i or vice versa as in *hidiv* (p. 188) instead of *hidiv*, *İrak* (pp. 15, 163) instead of *Irak*, *avariz hane* (p. 93) instead of *avarizhane* (taxable units).

The author employs the Arabic literature on the period very skillfully, which helps us to "hear" the voice of the local intellectuals. It is not only the chronicles, memoirs of the Mus-

lim *ulama* he employs but also of the non-Muslim literature. Further, the Ottoman archival documents are well incorporated into the story of the Arab people.

Compare to Masters' work Sabri Ateş's book, *Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands: Making a Boundary, 1843–1914*, is a much more thorough research undertaking with a focus on the borderland between two Muslim states and the people around it. Although the story of the borders and boundaries he presents took place more than a century and a half before, it is very relevant with today's discussions on the post-Ottoman states in the Kurdish regions, especially when the debate on the partition of Iraq is heated and the impasse on Syria has led to civil war. The artificiality of the borders in the Middle East is at the center of current polemic debates. The situation of the Kurdish tribes in the north or Arab tribes in the south, for instance, presented here, shows, despite their ethnic differences, how much "the borderlanders were connected by social, religious, and kinship networks, as well as frontier ethos, that transcended geography and environment" (p. 4). However, the history of the Ottoman-Iranian frontier proves a very complicated and unstable space, where tribe confederations constantly shift alliances to safeguard their own interests and extend their spheres of influence.⁸

Delimitation and demarcation were intended by the states in order to expand their authority on the frontiers and limit the movement of the

'borderlanders.' Such an intention succeeded through conferences and surveys by the boundary commissions. This book presents an excellent view from early in the 19th century until WWI of the Eastern frontiers. It shows how slowly and conscientiously the state, which is driven by modernization and centralization, tried to penetrate into and design the life of the indigenous peoples on the margins of the empire. Ateş's work brings out the voices of the locale and borderland communities. Although compared to the view of the members of the border commissions, the voices of the subaltern people are less heard since the author had to rely on the official documents. Resembling the work of an anthropologist, he still presents a very clear picture of the tribes and local elites.

Based on a variety of sources from British, Ottoman, and Iranian archives Ateş presents the most detailed and best studied case of the Ottoman-Iranian borderlands, as they were transformed from frontiers into the boundaries of the modern period. Through the process of making the boundaries the author also analyzes the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Iran. Ateş effectively deconstructs the language of the documents, which come essentially from the British archives, and successfully incorporates this language into the discussion. Although his sources come from a wealth of documents of the British Empire, revealing its importance as the real player in the game of boundary making at that time, the author manages

to tell an authentic story, as he critically approaches the documents and memoirs of the commission members and crosschecks the facts presented in these sources with the those in the Ottoman and Iranian archives.

Thanks to the sources from various archives, Ateş brings Ottoman and Iranian historiography into dialogue and thus contributes tremendously to the diplomatic history of the region. Combining the conditions on the ground with the regional and imperial appetite to design the sociopolitical structure of the borderlands, Ateş helps us to see how sophisticated and diverse these boundaries were while the view by these imperial powers towards the locale remained monolithic: subjects whom were part of a sovereign state.

Although the reader may have hard time to follow up with the introduction, which gives a wide perspective of the boundary literature, and the first chapter, which summarizes the last epoch of the Kurdish dynasties in Ottoman Kurdistan, throughout the following chapters the author very skillfully narrates the story of the members of the boundary commission and the locale, especially the tribes and their leaders. The language and vocabulary of the documents and memoirs are meticulously interwoven into the story of the border making process. Around the details he culled from the sources, the author creates a very stimulating narrative, which gives the sense of a chess game, awaiting the next move. In fact, the story goes that Selim I went

to Tabriz in disguise and played chess with Shah Ismail several times. Although just a myth to show the superiority of Selim, the story resembles the boundary relations between the Ottomans and Iranians.

The book is profusely illustrated with high-quality photographs and excellent maps, which are reproductions of the original ones, for each borderland recounted. Therefore, it is very easy to follow up with the discussion the author presents. However, one still looks for the full version of *Carte Identique*, the map produced by the Russo-British team for the Ottoman-Iranian borderland in 1869, in order to fully comprehend the story. Besides maps, Ateş goes through several treaties on the Ottoman-Iranian boundary and mentions them throughout the book but he does not present a full version of them at the end of the book, particularly the Erzurum Treaty of 1847.

After reading Masters' book with a more general perspective of the Arabs, especially with the sections on Syria, and the details Ateş presents on the gradual penetration of the state into the periphery of the empire, *War and State Formation in Syria: Cemal Pasha's Governorate During World War I, 1914-1917* makes much more sense. Çiçek's work brings up a new dimension to the CUP's administration in Syria, especially during WWI, when Cemal Pasha was governing the province between 1914-17. Through the story of Cemal Pasha's administration, the author looks at the Greater Syria from multifaceted angles

such as modern education, conscription, the urban infrastructure, and modernization of cities, and focuses on an array of religious, ethnic and political groups, including Muslims, Christians, Jews, Armenians, Zionists, Arabists, Druze, and Bedouins. With such layers in mind, the reader comes out with a much better understanding of the social and political history of modern Syria.

Çiçek discusses that Cemal Pasha tried to create an Ottoman identity of citizenry among the Arab and non-Arab Syrians and accomplished the goal of putting the Greater Syria under the rule of a central state. To accomplish this goal, he tried to reduce the influence of the Entente states and their citizens in Syria. Since he needed another European ally to balance the influence of France and Britain and also use it as a model to modernize the province he moved closer to Germany. However, this tactic proved insufficient, as war revealed the divisions in Syria. He had to deal with Arabists, Zionists, Armenian refugees, Druzes, and Bedouins. He wanted to modernize the cities through reconstruction, improve the sanitation, and fight wartime famine as well as epidemic diseases. Furthermore, he planned to rescue Egypt from the British occupation and subdue Lebanon.

Cemal Pasha used an iron fist to suppress the Arabists by executing several elite and prominent Syrians, exiling them to Anatolia and other parts of the empire, confiscating their property, forcing the common and rural

people to conscribe and send them to the Egyptian front for the war. Besides being loyal citizens to the rule of state, the people –especially Muslim Arabs– had to submit to the call of the caliph in Istanbul. Thus, Cemal Pasha emphasized the importance of the caliphate and tried to contain the British use of Sharif Hussein as an alternative Arab caliph.

Cemal Pasha was aware of the ambitions of the Zionists on Palestine and thus used all means to stop the influx of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe. He also accepted the Ottoman Jews as the leaders of the settlements in the area and encouraged the Entente Jews to become citizens. Those who did not naturalize were deported to nearby countries and areas like Egypt. While trying to integrate the Jews through the centralization policies he had to struggle with the propaganda against him by the well-organized Zionists in Europe and around the world. Like the Jewish subjects of the empire, Cemal Pasha tried to subjugate the Christians minorities, such as the Maronites of Lebanon and the Greek-Orthodox of Syria by appointing their religious leaders. By such policies he hoped that he would reduce France's influence on the Maronites and Russia's over the Greek-Orthodox.

Besides Jews and Christian minorities, he aimed to reinforce the state's authority on the Druze and the Bedouins with new policies. Cemal Pasha gave more autonomy to the Druze in return of their loyalty. As he was aware of the difficulty of putting them

under the control of the central government his policy towards the Druze worked well and their loyalty was secured until the end of the war. He employed the same method towards the Bedouins, especially towards Ibn Saud in order to reduce Sharif Hussein's influence over the Arab tribes.

Çicek's work can be used as a supplement for Modern Middle East history classes. Such a book will be more useful if the second edition contains more visual aids, such as maps, documents produced by the Ottomans and European powers, headlines from newspapers, photographs of railroads, schools, city centers, soldiers, migrants, war scenes, and political figures. Çicek abundantly makes use of primary documents from different archives of Turkey, Germany, Austria, and Britain in order to reconstruct the period. He also uses memoirs, periodicals, correspondence between the leaders, and local sources. A combination of all sources brings out a broad and complex story of the last period of the Ottoman administration in Greater Syria. Through this variety of sources, sides, and actors one encounters a multifaceted account of Ottoman provincial administration in Syria. By pointing to different aspects of Cemal Pasha's time and rule in Syria this oeuvre will be a preliminary source for the discussion on the period, especially when there is more demand for different approaches to WWI.

The last couple of decades witnessed an increasing number of well-studied works on the Arab and Eastern prov-

inces of the Ottoman Empire. The three works reviewed here, as well as other studies on the provinces, are usually based on strong theories where the authors present their cases from complex perspectives and tend to approach the previous works from a revisionist standpoint. The variety of sources from Western and the Eastern countries these three oeuvres employ brings a fresh look to the history of the lands of the Ottoman Empire. Although these authors do not refer to each other's present and previous works, all three books complete and complement each other in terms of change and continuity in the Ottoman Arab and Eastern provincial history. Further, their emphasis on the importance of the local elites such as the *ulama*, tribal *aghas*, and urban notables and the power negotiation between state and society through these elites is noteworthy. Such studies not only put the story of the locals into the right context from a constructive perspective but also may help us to have a better grasp on the genesis of the present political and social structure in the Middle East. ■

Endnotes

1. Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700-1922* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 194.
2. Albert Hourani, "Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables," in *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. William R. Polk and Richard L. Chambers (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968); See also James L. Gelvin, "The 'Politics of Notables' Forty Years After," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (June 2006), pp. 19-29.
3. Philip Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism: The Politics of Damascus, 1860-1920*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
4. David Dean Commins, *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
5. Jane Hathaway, "Rewriting Eighteenth-Century Ottoman History," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 19, No. 1 (2004), pp. 29-53.
6. Quoted by Bruce Masters from Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
7. Avyarov, *Osmanlı-Rus ve İran Savaşlarında Kürtler: 1801-1900*, Translated by Muhammed Varlı. (Ankara: Sipan Yayıncılık, 1995), p. 147.
8. Rhoads Murphey, "The Resumption of Ottoman-Safavid Border Conflict, 1603-1638: Effects of Border Destabilization on the Evolution of State-Tribe Relations," *Orientwissenschaftliche Hefte, Mitteilungen des SFB "Differenz und Integration" 5: (Militär und Integration, Halle, 2003)*, pp. 151-55.