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## Sovereignty After Empire: Comparing the Middle East and Central Asia

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*Edited by Sally Cummings and Raymond Hinnebusch*

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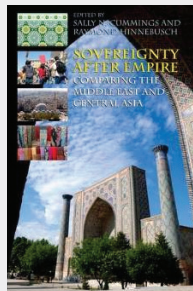
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*Reviewed by Gül Berna Özcan*

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THE DEMISE of empires left a powerful and perplexing legacy for successor states in the Middle East and Central Asia. Sally Cummings and Raymond Hinnebusch set the scene for this fascinating collection of essays in the introduction, where they address the limits of the Westphalian state system and frame the sovereignty question in relation to the imported character of the state in former colonies. Empires were amorphous, whether as contiguous landforms or maritime empires. In contrast to modern nation-states with clearly demarcated boundaries as prerequisites for legitimacy, empires could devolve variable autonomies from the center without breaking up. Empires may adapt to nationalism and local challenges, but the nation-states that emerge are fragile. What is especially interesting about this volume is that the authors seek to explore continuities, ruptures and divergences. In stark contrast to those who suggest that the legacy of imperialism is no longer relevant, these essays focus on the understanding that comes from analyses of the imperial and colonial past.

Sovereignty comprises a range of attributes that include a territory, population, effective domestic hierarchy of control, *de jure* constitutional independence, *de facto* absence of external authority, international recognition and the ability to regulate trans-border flows. However, these attributes are contested



and challenged internally, as well as externally. The editors draw a useful distinction between realist and constructivist understandings of sovereignty: “For neorealism and neoliberalism, sovereign states are the basic ontological given: the actors in international politics are unitary, territorial, autonomous entities; they are sovereign states” (p. 7). Constructivists, however, view sovereignty as a product of interactions among state elites and international institutions. For them, this explains the absence of stateness in most post-colonial countries. Nevertheless, international norms of sovereignty and the delegitimization of empires have not created autonomy for state-builders in peripheral countries. For the post-colonial Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia, sovereignty was mostly imposed from outside and entrusted to tribal groups or privileged elites.

The case of Central Asia is particularly illuminating because it was ruled by Tsarist Russia and its successor, the Soviet Union. Under Tsarist Russian rule, Central Asians were colonial appendages, but their aristocracy and nomadic nobility preserved privileges so long as they did not clash with the empire. Under the Soviet Union, however, the entire region was engineered by central party rule through cultural, geographical, demographic and economic manipulation, including massive purges of the aristocracy and the learned

elite. One consequence of the deconstructed social system is that the current states appear self-contained and the ruling elites subscribe to Soviet structures of nationhood.

The first section deals with the “Histories of Empire” in three chapters on Russian (D. Lieven), British and French (J. McDougall), and Ottoman (F. H. Lawson) post-imperial and colonial legacies. Dominic Lieven emphasizes certain similarities among Austrian, Ottoman and Russian land empires and sees post-imperial Turkey as the ultimate winner. A realistic understanding of the limits of the country’s geopolitical power by Kemal Atatürk defined the discourse of the victorious nation’s modernity. While Russia has a powerful post-imperial legacy, it has no real substance to fall back on. Fred Lawson’s analysis of the Ottoman legacy and economic sovereignty in Anatolia, Syria and Iraq offers much food for thought about the diverging legacies of Ottoman rule in the Middle East and the dangers of simplistic conclusions about the degree of sovereignty. Syria’s divergence from the Ottoman trade economy under its French administration led to colonial-style corporatism that enhanced local industries and strengthened the bourgeoisie. British rule in Iraq, however, perpetuated the weak bourgeoisie and narrow industrial and agricultural base.

The second section, “Paths to Sovereignty: Views From the Core and Periphery,” examines the nature of sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire (B. Fortna), mandated sovereignty in the formation of Arab statehood (M. Burgis), and the unintentional independence of the Central Asian states (M. Suyarkulova). Benjamin Fortna reminds us here how diverse nationalistic movements and linguistic and political divisions created the powerful separation between Arab and Turkish heartlands

and how Turkey emerged as the most able sovereign state.

Within the “Empire and Domestic Sovereignty” section, Louise Fawcett explores how an imperial past affects sovereignty outcomes, perceptions and choices. Although sovereignty failures in the Middle East cannot merely be attributed to Western agency, European imperialism’s promotion of dominant national groups and its interests in natural resources offered fragile foundations for state-building. Competing narratives about a broader Arab or Islamic nation rejects the Western model of the nation-state, but these alternative perspectives have not been strong enough to overcome economic and security structures. David Lewis analyses the institutional creations of Russian colonization in Central Asia’s authoritarian states. These structures were not passive creations, but were used by local elites as well as international actors for power formation. This is consistent with what I argued in my analysis of the “mikado game” in newly independent states (*Building States and Markets*, Palgrave, 2010): the Soviet elite, particularly the Khrushchev generation, became the major beneficiaries of the dissolution and reallocation of the state’s economic assets and its internationalization process.

In the fourth section, “Empire and Popular Sovereignty,” there are three thought-provoking chapters dealing with culture and colonialism in Central Asia (L. Adams), the ‘Western question’ and post-imperial states in the Middle East (M. Valbjørn), and Islamist mobilization against the state (F. Volpi). Laura Adams points out important differences between the ideological Soviet project of creating Homo Sovieticus and its envisaged perfect state and European liberalism and enlightenment. Morten Valbjørn introduces the sovereignty debacle of Middle Eastern states

as a 'Western question' and points out that although the idea of the state has taken root in the region since Europeans orchestrated post-Ottoman reorganization, its core characters continue to be contested and the role of national and religious identity remains uncertain, especially for the Arab world.

The final section, "Empire and External Sovereignty," includes chapters on state formation in Jordan and Syria (R. Hinnebusch), rentierism and dependency in Central Asia (W. Ostrowski), and Tajikistan's change in status from colony to sovereign dependency (M. Atkin). In Raymond Hinnebusch's analysis, the tale of two brothers is a forceful reminder of intrigue and deceit on the way to sovereign statehood. The British promised an independent Arab state in greater Syria if Sharif Hussein of Mecca revolted against the Ottomans, while secretly plotting to divide up the area and take Palestine and Iraq for themselves. One of Sharif Hussein's two sons, Faisal, arrived in Syria to start a revolt under the banner of Arab nationalism despite the fact that most Syrians at the time were loyal to the Ottoman Empire. He was later abandoned by the British and accepted French patronage for survival. His shrewd brother, Abdullah, however, was seen by Winston Churchill as an ideal agent to rule Jordan. Jordan was to become a buffer state to protect the emergence of Israel in Palestine.

The editors' conclusion highlights the diversity of political, geographical and cultural

contestations of post-imperial states. Turkey emerges as an exception: a country that fought a successful independence war and could engage with the West with confidence more or less on its own terms. This positive outlook is an outcome of concerted nation-building efforts by a generation of intellectuals in the late Ottoman era. In my view, the shrewd skills of the founding leaders of the Turkish Republic showed how to secure sovereignty internally as well as externally. However, throughout the Cold War, Turkey's elite became defensive and insular while domestic politics stagnated. Despite three decades of normalization and democratization since the 1980 military coup, the vision and skills of party leaders has been mediocre at best. Recent political developments signal tough challenges ahead. Historians will note how the AK Party's foreign policy experiments, personalized micro-management style, rollercoaster relations with neighboring states, and particularly its miscalculations on Syria generated sovereignty problems. Internally, the unresolved Kurdish question, competing hegemonic structures in state institutions and widespread corruption claims intensify political uncertainty.

One lesson that comes out clearly in these analyses is that sovereignty may be bestowed or won, but it has to be consciously constructed and defended for it to be preserved. This book will make excellent reading for political scientists, historians, geographers and economists, as well as practitioners and diplomats.