

## *The Ottoman experience*

When those states which have been acquired are accustomed to live at liberty under their own laws, there are three ways of holding them. The first is to despoil them; the second is to go and live there in person; the third is to allow them to live under their own laws, taking tribute of them and creating within the country a government composed of a few who will keep it friendly to you.

– Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 1532

Toward the end of the fifteenth century, an Ottoman scribe named Bali was charged with surveying the newly acquired island of Limnos in the northern Aegean. The Ottoman treasury needed to know what sorts of revenues the island could be expected to provide. Bali

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went out of his way to explain the animal husbandry practices of the peasants so that the treasury would understand his calculation of the sheep tax:

because the climate of the island is temperate and is not excessively cold, they apparently are not accustomed to separating their rams from their ewes. For this reason their lambs are not particular to one season. Were they to be counted along with the sheep it would cause the peasants some distress; because they were desirous of and agreed to give 1 *akçe* per head of sheep, their lambs were not counted with them. It was recorded that only their sheep be counted, and that 1 *akçe* be given per head of sheep.<sup>1</sup>

It is an arresting image: an Ottoman scribe, pen in hand, listens patiently to the inhabitants’ explanations and then copies their words into the imperial survey that will find its way to the palace in Istanbul. But it is more than an image. This detail from the 1490 survey of the island of Limnos is an early example of what would prove to be an enduring imperial style that had two essential, and closely related, features.

First, the empire possessed an extraordinary ability to find those few local residents who were willing and able to keep

<sup>1</sup> Heath W. Lowry, *Fifteenth Century Ottoman Realities: Christian Peasant Life on the Aegean Island of Limnos* (Istanbul: Eren, 2002), 109.

vast territories friendly to the House of Osman. Second, the Ottoman imperial administration had an uncanny knack for going into a newly conquered area and figuring out how things were done there. Having read the local landscape, it would adjust imperial rule accordingly.

In short, the extraordinary sensitivity of the Ottoman elite to local conditions allowed them to build an empire across three continents that endured for many centuries.

The Ottomans first emerge on the historical stage at the very end of the thirteenth century. In the royal myth, the dynasty stretches much further back, of course, but it was only under the leadership of Osman (1299 – 1326) that this small group of warriors managed to move out from its base in northwestern Anatolia and start conquering territory.<sup>2</sup> Their first significant victories occurred in the Balkans, and these conquests allowed them to return to western Anatolia flush with men and money. By the middle of the fifteenth century they had surrounded the Byzantine capital Constantinople. Their capture of the great city in 1453 marked the beginning of the imperial phase of Ottoman history.

Over the course of the next century they pushed steadily eastward and then southward. First they defeated the remaining Turkish principalities in Anatolia and then, in 1516 and 1517, they conquered the heartlands of the Islamic world – Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. With these latter-day conquests they could now claim leadership of the Islamic world. The empire reached its greatest territorial extent under Suleyman (1520 – 1566), who conquered Hungary in the north (1526), Iraq in the east (1534), and

2 It is Osman who gave the dynasty its name – the Osmanli, or followers of Osman. ‘Osmanli’ became ‘Ottoman’ to European observers.

North Africa in the west – the last in a series of incremental gains dating from the earlier part of his reign.

Except for the loss of Hungary at the end of the seventeenth century, the territory of the empire remained relatively stable until the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Serbian (1804) and Greek (1821) insurrections were the beginning of what proved to be an unstoppable hemorrhaging of territory in the empire’s European heartland. A combination of nationalist aspirations and Great Power interference led to the end of the Ottoman Empire in Europe by the eve of World War I. The Ottoman entry into the war on the German side had fatal consequences for the survival of what remained of the empire. The victorious British and French armies took over the Middle East and carved it up into colonies, although these were called ‘mandates’ in deference to rising anti-colonialist sentiment. Anatolia, which was all that remained, was also in danger of being parceled out to various contenders. It was only the unexpected military resistance of a group of disaffected Ottoman army officers – led by the remarkable Mustafa Kemal, later known as Atatürk – that saved the day.

But Kemal was not interested in saving the empire. Rather, he wanted to create a modern state that would replace a defeated empire whose leaders had proved unable to fashion a response to European imperialism. Thus it was a Turk, ironically enough, who brought about the end of the Ottoman Empire. Under Atatürk’s leadership, the Grand National Assembly abolished the sultanate in 1922 and declared the new Republic of Turkey in 1923.

In 1490, when Bali wrote to Istanbul about Limniot practices of animal husbandry, the Ottoman army was plowing

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through the Balkan Peninsula, subduing one city after another in rapid succession. The army would soon do the same in Anatolia and the Arab lands. Naturally enough, then, it is the janissary, and not the scribe, who figures prominently in conventional depictions of the empire during the golden age of conquest.

The janissary, with his crashing cymbals as he marched onto the battlefield, was the terror of Christendom. Compared to European military forces, the janissary corps was famously disciplined; it was said that when janissaries bowed their heads at the same time, they resembled a field of ripe corn rippling in the breeze. The janissary seemed to embody everything that was believed – and to a great extent is still believed – to account for the greatness of the Ottomans in their prime in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Plucked from his (Christian) mother's breast at a young age, he proved the sultan's ability to reach down into society and remake individuals at will. Once trained, the janissary was believed to possess unsurpassed martial virtue. At the same time, he, like the rest of the Ottoman bureaucracy, gave the sultan absolute obedience. The end result has often been described as a perfectly ordered machine.

It is not surprising that war and conquest, rather than the more mundane activities of scribes, are still at the center of our view of the Ottomans. We are the inheritors of a long tradition of European writings on the empire, and the Europeans wrote with their own concerns in mind. The Ottomans were *the* threat to European civilization. "This most powerful emperor's forces are of two kinds, those of the sea and those of the land and both are terrifying," wrote a Venetian diplomat in 1573.<sup>3</sup> The Ottomans

3 Lucette Valensi, *The Birth of the Despot: Venice and the Sublime Porte* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 28.

were the first state to maintain a standing army in Europe since Roman days, and this impressed the Europeans to no end. The Byzantine Chalcocondyle marveled that "there is no prince who has his armies and camps in better order, both in abundance of victuals and in the beautiful order they use in encamping without any confusion or embarrassment."<sup>4</sup>

But an undue emphasis on the Ottoman war machine has deflected our attention from an appreciation of how the Ottomans actually ruled their vast territories for over six hundred years. Military conquest created the empire, but it did not, and could not, sustain it. For that the Ottomans needed scribes, not janissaries. Limnos is one of the earliest examples of an imperial style that relied heavily on local people to run things for Istanbul. This example undermines the view that the empire was administered by a central bureaucracy whose dictates were enforced by military power.

Limnos was contested territory on the edge of the Ottoman Empire in 1490. Over the previous half century, the island had gone back and forth between Latin and Ottoman rule; the most recent exchange dated back only a decade to when the Venetians surrendered the island to Sultan Beyazit II. Yet a mere nineteen janissaries garrisoned the island (a number of them, recent converts to Islam, spoke Greek). The real work of securing the island's defense was done by several hundred local Christian troops who enjoyed a reduced tax status in exchange for their military service, and who had been recruited by the Ottomans for the very reason that they had

4 Jason Goodwin, *Lords of the Horizons: A History of the Ottoman Empire* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), 70.

served a similar function under the Byzantines. The local nobility retained their holdings, and church and monastic property went undisturbed.

Even in this brief account we can see the Ottomans' keen attentiveness to the local, in terms not just of accommodation, but also of an ability to size up the situation and turn it to Ottoman advantage. A predilection for co-optation had been evident from the very moment the Ottomans entered the historical record. In the case of Limnos, they were able to discern who had traditionally undertaken the defense of the island and to enlist them. We do not know who Bali was; he may have been a Greek by birth who converted to Islam and joined the bureaucracy. Or he could have been accompanied by a translator who communicated his queries to the Limniots. Whichever the case, the Ottomans were able to deploy adequately trained individuals who effectively turned conquests into tax-producing provinces.

If we turn to newly conquered, mid-sixteenth-century Palestine, the same method is on display. By now the Ottoman bureaucracy was fully developed and the Palestinian provinces received a full compliment of officials, many more than Limnos had in 1490. But these officials were quick to bring village leaders into the hierarchy of government, albeit informally. The office of village leader, known as *rais*, was already a very old one by the time the Ottomans arrived in the Fertile Crescent. They retained the *rais* as a useful liaison to the tax-paying population and rewarded him with robes (the traditional gift to officials from the earliest days of Islam), thereby integrating local leaders into the symbolic structure of the empire.

Local people also figured prominently in the proceedings of the Ottoman court, where many lines of authority converged. The *kadi*, or judge, routinely

called upon local experts to assist him in investigating the cases that came before him, such as disputes over taxation. Impressed by the neat categories in Ottoman survey registers, we have failed to adequately appreciate that taxation was a complicated business. Palestinian olive trees, for example, were taxed differently depending on their age, which affected their fruit-bearing ability. It was unlikely that someone from Istanbul would have been able to determine the age of those trees.<sup>5</sup>

Even those who officially served in the name of the sultan were a more heterogeneous group than has commonly been presented. Prior to the seventeenth century, the link between the military and provincial administration was an essential device of Ottoman governance. In return for their work, the sultan's soldiers, known as timariots, were assigned one or multiple villages whose revenue they were entitled to collect. When they were not off on campaign, these soldiers resided in or near their holdings. In this way the state both supported an army and gained a class of provincial administrators who were charged with tax collection and the maintenance of law and order.

But rural administration did not rest in the hands of timariots alone. When the province of Aintab in southeastern Anatolia was wrested from the Mamluks and joined to the empire's domains in 1517, not all the villages were assigned to the soldiers of the standing army. Some went to local Turkmen tribal chiefs, while others stayed in the hands of the urban magnates from Aintab or from nearby Aleppo who had privately owned them. For example, the village of Cağdi-

5 This account of Ottoman administration in Palestine is drawn from Amy Singer, *Palestinian Peasants and Ottoman Officials: Rural Administration Around Sixteenth-Century Jerusalem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

ğın belonged to a very special family indeed, namely, the heirs of the last powerful Mamluk sultan, from whom the Ottomans had wrested Egypt and Greater Syria.<sup>6</sup> The Ghawri family resided in Aleppo and employed a local agent to manage its estates and collect taxes. Over time the family was absorbed into the Ottoman elite; the governor-general of Aleppo in 1574 was one Mehmed Pasha al-Ghawri.

The cases of Palestine and Aintab that I have just discussed are particularly significant because they occurred in the middle of the sixteenth century, traditionally seen as the era when the Ottomans were at the very height of their power. As we have seen, an important part of this power was administrative; the Ottomans recruited, developed, and deployed a class of imperial bureaucrats across the empire. These bureaucrats, who ironed out and smoothed over local peculiarities, it is said, gave the empire its effectiveness and uniformity. In this story of the empire, local elites either failed to develop or were bypassed, and would only become important later on when the central bureaucracy was less effective.

This description overstates the case and misclassifies what was a rather fleeting moment as the classical juncture from which all future developments are said to have deviated. After all, the Ottomans only assigned a career officer to Palestine in 1520; by the end of the century the entire region was back under the control of Bedouin chiefs who were officially recognized by the Ottomans as local governors.<sup>7</sup>

6 Leslie P. Peirce, *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 139.

7 Singer, *Palestinian Peasants and Ottoman Officials*, 32.

In a classic article written many years ago, Albert Hourani coined the phrase “the politics of notables” to characterize the constellation of forces that governed the empire as a whole in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He described a class of conservative notables who were firmly entrenched in local society and equipped with their own private militias, and who offered themselves as mediators between the Ottoman authorities and provincial society. The Ottomans were content to rely on these informal elites, bestowing tax-gathering privileges and political office on them in exchange for loyalty.

Rather than framing this development as decline, historians are now asking more open-ended questions about the experience of provincial life in the Ottoman Empire of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In one historian’s felicitous phrase, we would like to know more about “the meaning of autonomy.”<sup>8</sup> Beshara Doumani’s recent study of Nablus and its hinterland – once again, in Palestine – provides us with a particularly vivid sense of place.

As was true across the Ottoman Empire, the Nablusis had a strong sense of local identity that was nurtured by the imperial style of rule. They were proud of the beauty of their city, whose twenty-two gushing springs fed the olive groves, vineyards, and fruit orchards that surrounded it. Localism was buttressed by the fact that the city was ruled by local sons, most of whom had descended from the same families for generations. Many of the patriarchs of the ruling families had originally come to the city as Ottoman soldiers, but they quickly melted into the local population,

8 Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700 – 1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

marrying into wealthy merchant and religious families. They vied with one another for appointment to political office, a process controlled and shrewdly exploited by the Ottoman governor of Damascus.

Their conservative rule endured even through the upheavals of the nineteenth century. While they were disinclined to fight for the sultan in faraway places, they were quick to defend themselves when threatened. In the course of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, it was the Nablusis who handed the French emperor his first defeat in Palestine. Moneylending and trade networks, rather than military power and tax collection, tied the countryside to the city. Long-standing clientage relationships between peasants and urban merchants were passed from father to son, and the rootedness of these networks allowed trading activity to flourish across a wide area, despite an often unpredictable political environment. Even today, elderly Palestinians can remember how their grandfathers were expected to host their rural clients when they came into the city. The peasants had to be put up and fed well, lest their urban patrons suffer a loss of honor.

Besides stressing militarism, the tradition of European writing on the Ottoman Empire has also firmly fixed the empire's Islamic identity in the mind of the general reader. The term 'Muslim empire' has been more than simply descriptive; it has been a sort of shorthand for what we think the Ottomans represented. Their successful military conquests, it is said, were driven by the religious obligation of holy war against the infidel. There is the standard nod to Suleyman the Magnificent, who brought the empire's legal system into accordance with Islamic precepts. European

scholarship also typically hauls in Islam to explain that old saw, the decline of the Ottoman Empire. According to this theory, the decline was brought about in part by the rise of an intolerant Islamic spirit that smothered creativity.<sup>9</sup>

It is a mistake to describe the Ottomans in terms of some sort of essential Islamic mission. The impulse to do so is, I think, a reflection of the fact that any discussion of empire today is very hard to disentangle from the ideology of imperialism. We must separate the practice of empire from the ideology of imperialism if we wish to understand the Ottoman Empire. Empire as governance existed long before imperialism as ideology. Particularly in the Mediterranean world, which had been subject to imperial rule from the time of the Romans, the Ottomans were able to draw on a number of rich political and cultural traditions, only some of which were Islamic. The challenge was not to justify empire.<sup>10</sup> What other aspiration could a potential ruler possibly have? The challenge was to justify themselves as the proper leaders of a *new* empire. It was the House of Osman, not empire, that was on trial as the new state slowly took shape.

Ottoman claims of legitimacy drew on several sources, of which the Islamic tra-

9 See, for example, the penultimate chapter in Halil Inalcik's book *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age, 1300 - 1600* (London: Phoenix, 1994). The chapter is entitled "The Triumph of Fanaticism."

10 It is perhaps this inability to separate empire from the historical experience of imperialism that led a reviewer in a recent *New York Times Book Review* devoted to empires to assert the "dull uniformity of Asian empires." The Ottomans, it seems, like the Safavids and the Mughals, did not have an exciting enough project. See Paul Kennedy, "Conquerors and Missionaries," *The New York Times Book Review*, July 25, 2004, 10.

dition was only one. In the words of one historian, “the Ottomans were highly flexible in their use of legitimizing ideologies.”<sup>11</sup> One of the earliest tropes to emerge was the celebration of the early Ottomans as *ghazis*, or warriors for Islam, whose raids and wars were part of a divinely imposed obligation.<sup>12</sup> This was a straightforward enough claim with regard to the Balkans, where the population was Christian. To get around the somewhat awkward fact that many of the early wars in Anatolia were fought against other Muslim rulers, two traditions developed. First, it was asserted that oftentimes territory was acquired through peaceful acquisition rather than force of arms. Second, rulers who had been vanquished were charged with having oppressed Muslims, thus justifying Ottoman intervention. Some historians have gone so far as to wonder whether the Ottomans saw themselves as Islamic warriors or if they adhered to a more general, and religiously nonspecific, ideal of heroism and honorable conduct.

The Ottomans also asserted a more illustrious genealogy than that of the other Turkish emirs in Anatolia. They claimed that their sultans descended from Oğuz Khan, a legendary great ruler and ancestor of the Turks, while their Turkish neighbors were only distant relations.

Once Mehmet the Conqueror took Constantinople, the imperial capital par excellence, in 1453, he adopted many imperial motifs, including the Golden Ap-

ple, a commonly recognized symbol of universal sovereignty.<sup>13</sup> Prior sultans in the former capitals of Bursa, then Edirne, had lived simply and prayed alongside fellow Muslims in the mosque. The palace that Mehmet had constructed for himself on the ancient acropolis of Byzantium was designed to ensure imperial seclusion, as was the dynastic law code he drew up toward the end of his reign. Among other things, it abolished the practice of eating in the presence of his courtiers and strictly limited the occasions on which petitions could be presented to him in person.

Mehmet was famously inspired by the empires of the past and saw himself as the heir to the Roman Empire. His identification with Alexander the Great was so strong that he commissioned a biography of himself, in Greek, on the same paper and in the same format as his copy of Arrian’s *The Life of Alexander the Great*. The latter was read to him daily.<sup>14</sup>

The beginning of the sixteenth century saw the rise of an enemy more formidable than the patchwork of Turkish emirates that the Ottomans had swept away in Anatolia. In Iran, the Safavid dynasty, established by the charismatic mystical leader Ismail Shah, proclaimed a militant Shiism that was presented as morally, religiously, and politically superior to the Sunni form of Islam observed in the

11 Linda T. Darling, *Revenue-Raising and Legitimacy: Tax Collection and Finance Administration in the Ottoman Empire, 1560 – 1660* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 294.

12 There is tremendous debate amongst Ottoman historians about the extent to which the earliest Ottomans saw themselves as Muslims fighting a holy war.

13 Legend had it that Alexander the Great possessed an apple made from the gold taken as tribute from the conquered provinces, which he held in his hand as if he held the world. Gülru Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapi Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 12.

14 Philip Mansel, *Constantinople: City of the World’s Desire, 1453 – 1924* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 6.

Ottoman Empire. The consolidation of Spanish Hapsburg rule at the other end of the Mediterranean also contributed to an age of strenuous ideological competition.

In response, the Ottomans increasingly portrayed themselves as pious orthodox Muslims. Suleyman, assisted by his energetic and long-serving religious advisor, sought to reconcile sultanic with Islamic law in an ambitious program of legal reform that included the strengthening of Islamic courts and the extension of state purview over matters that had previously been of little official concern, such as marriage. In the 1540s, Suleyman added the Islamic term 'caliph' to his list of titles.

A lesser-known image of Suleyman is that of the Lawgiver as Messiah; the prophetic and messianic currents that were so strong in Europe and the Mediterranean in the sixteenth century had their counterpart in the Ottoman Empire. Those around him, and Suleyman himself, proclaimed him as the Emperor of the Last Age, who would soon establish universal dominion. The sultan's geomancer wrote that the ultimate victory and establishment of the universal rule of Islam would be ensured by an army of invisible saints fighting by the sultan's side.

Yet even before Suleyman's death in 1566 there was a new emphasis on the institutional and judicial perfection of the sultan. No longer the restless world conqueror, he was lauded as the creator and quiet center of the perfect order; he was the Refuge of the World. As the Ottoman war machine wound down, seventeenth-century writers would further encourage the idea of consolidation. Citing the theories and biological metaphors of Ibn Khaldun, they stated that the empire was no longer in the heroic phase of expansion, but had entered the

more mature stage of security and tranquility.

Throughout all the permutations of the imperial image, the provision of justice, to the peasantry in particular, remained absolutely central to sultanic legitimacy. This was not an empty rhetoric. It is clear that both the population and the sultan took the latter's responsibility for justice seriously; the Ottoman archives are stuffed with thousands of petitions that were recorded in the registers, and responded to, year after year. The council hall in the palace where petitions were read was built with open walls to symbolize the free access of the empire's subjects, Muslim and non-Muslim, to imperial justice. This duty of the ruler to provide justice, to embody imperial benevolence, was something the Ottomans shared with all premodern states. In the Near Eastern tradition, it was expressed through the Circle of Justice, which said that the ruler could not exist without the military, nor the military without the sword, nor the sword without money, nor money without the peasants, nor the peasants without justice. The Chinese also tied royal legitimacy to the provision of justice to the peasants. The right to petition the king was limited in Europe, but there too justice was the jewel in the crown of the Christian King.

The Circle of Justice represented a consensus on the proper ordering of society that was shared by both rulers and ruled. This consensus would come apart in the nineteenth century, and it was the state itself that would launch its dismantling.

Through the skillful co-optation of military and financial leaders, the Ottomans had achieved a form of rule that was extremely stable, even though its maintenance required constant bargaining. The

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other side of the coin, however, was that the government could attract only a low level of commitment from most of its subjects. Its ability to mobilize manpower and money was limited. The residents of Nablus, for example, were perfectly willing to battle Napoleon, but they undertook this in the defense of local interests and not on behalf of the sultan.

This was sufficient for a time. The last quarter of the eighteenth century, however, was marked by war, war, and more war. Russia, whose power had been growing steadily, managed to wrest the Crimea and the northern shores of the Black Sea from the Ottomans. The shock of these losses was great, since both were areas of dense Muslim settlement. The Ottomans also fought with the Hapsburgs. Then came the French occupation of Egypt in 1798, which signaled the return of Great Power conflict to the Mediterranean after a long hiatus. Turmoil continued throughout the Napoleonic Wars, including an internal uprising in Serbia that received external support, due to European designs on the Ottoman Empire.

Faced with these threats, the Ottoman sultans, beginning with Selim III, initiated a series of reforms that, at the most basic level, sought to mobilize the people and the resources of the empire in the service of the state. Military reform, naturally enough, was the initial priority, but initiatives soon spread to other areas such as education. A medical school was set up in 1827 to train doctors for the new army. In the 1830s, schools proliferated as Sultan Mahmud II, sometimes described as the Peter the Great of the Ottoman Empire, sought to create not just an officer corps but also a new civil service to implement and enforce his measures.

A famous decree of 1839, which was henceforth known as Tanzimat, laid

down the essential themes of Ottoman reform. These themes would be modified, diluted, or strengthened over the course of the next eighty years or so, but they remained the basis for state policy nevertheless. Tanzimat declared the security of life, honor, and property for all Ottoman subjects. Tax farming was abolished and an elaborate centralized provincial administration – modeled on the French system – was laid down. Equality before the law for all subjects, for Muslim and non-Muslim, was decreed.

These measures, as well as an assortment of more minor reforms, were linked by the wish to mobilize society and to effectively direct it through a newly energized, centralized state. By making property rights more secure, it was hoped that a new class of private property owners would increase agriculture revenues. The proclamation of religious equality before the law sought to facilitate the creation of a new, secular elite – a group of ardent Ottoman citizens who would become loyal patriots, not unlike those in France, England, and the other ascendant European nation-states.

The Ottoman reforms were ambitious and wide-ranging. Not surprisingly, some were resisted and many others were only imperfectly or partially executed. In the Balkans, the Ottomans, hemmed in by Great Power competition and the territorial ambitions of the new nation-states on the peninsula, were racing against the clock. A bad harvest in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1874 led to a peasant revolt the following year. One hundred years earlier this would have been purely an internal matter, but it quickly turned into an international crisis that, through a long and convoluted series of events, ended with the creation of the new state of Bulgaria in 1878. By

the eve of World War I, the Ottoman Empire had lost almost all its European territories.

Elsewhere, however, in Anatolia and the Arab lands, the Ottoman Empire in fact became more powerful, more rational, and more capable of imposing its will on society. Faced with European encroachment, it did not disintegrate, as did so many other non-Western empires – for example, in Iran and India. Bureaucrats managed not only to centralize many of the empire's activities, but also to establish effective rule in places that had always been notoriously difficult to rule, such as the tribal areas of Arabia and Transjordan. Through the application of reformist land laws, Transjordan recovered a level of demographic and economic growth not seen since Byzantine times.<sup>15</sup> In the last quarter of the century, the British, who were busy concluding local agreements with Arab sheikhs, were alarmed by the new influence of the Ottomans in the Arabian Gulf.

Yet the reforms, by launching such a determined attack on traditional power-sharing arrangements, by their radical rethinking of the relationship between ruler and ruled, required the government to embark on an ambitious project of ideological legitimation. Its response was very similar to that of other modernizing empires, such as Austria, Russia, and Japan, in the pressure cooker of the nineteenth century. The 'invention of tradition' dramatically increased the pomp and circumstance surrounding the sultan and all activities of state. By the end of the nineteenth century, for example, curious onlookers lined the road to watch the Friday prayer ceremony as

15 Eugene L. Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850 – 1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 69.

Abdulhamid and his entourage departed from the palace and headed for the Yıldız Mosque. Albanian house guards in livery, their spears glinting in the sun, escorted the imperial landau while a military band struck up the *Hamidiye*, the musical salute to the sultan. A sort of dais was built to accommodate foreign visitors who were permitted to watch the procession and to salute the monarch.

The state also tried to define a new basis for loyalty to the House of Osman. The novel concept of Ottoman patriotism, which declared the unity and equality of all Ottoman subjects, was favored at midcentury. As time wore on and the European provinces dropped away, Islamic and then Turkish nationalism rendered the earlier concept of an Ottoman citizenry increasingly problematic. Throughout this last century of the empire, the project of Ottoman subjecthood was fraught with tensions and contradictions that undermined formerly stable traditions of rule.

The regime's use of the Islamic heritage was complex and multifaceted. The Ottomans sought to exploit Islam for imperial advantage in a sort of 'Islamic etatism,' just as Catherine II had used Christian orthodoxy in Russia and Maria Theresa had turned to Catholicism in the Hapsburg lands. Among other things, Islam was used to try and enlist the empire's Muslim subjects in the state's modernizing goals. After the destruction of the janissaries, Mahmud II turned to the conscription of Ottoman Muslim subjects and dubbed his new army the "Trained Victorious Soldiers of Muhammad." This is just one example. Again and again over the course of the next century, political leaders turned to Islam as a way of establishing a connection between them and their Muslim subjects.

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At the same time, the Ottomans settled on Islam to articulate and proclaim their fundamental difference from the West in an era of rampant Westernization. It is ironic that the Europeans, too, saw Islam as the defining characteristic of the East, although the conclusions they drew from this fact were very different. And yet, as we have seen in the Tanzimat reforms, the Ottoman Empire relentlessly pursued a policy of secularization.

How can these seeming oppositions be reconciled? We must understand that there was a central tension in Ottoman reform. The goal was not just to strengthen the state; it was to strengthen it in a certain way, so that the state looked bureaucratic, tolerant, and, most of all, modern. The Tanzimat was, in this sense, an internalization of European representations of the Orient and its problems. But the Ottomans were also duty-bound to resist the West, because the West denied the possibility of progress for the Muslim world. The embrace of Islam was their way of defying the fate that was predicted for them.

It is ironic that Arab elites were never more Ottoman than at the moment of the empire's dissolution.<sup>16</sup> Abandoning the looser style of rule that had been typical of earlier centuries, nineteenth-century reforms succeeded in creating several generations of Arab bureaucrats who were closely tied to the imperial project. An Arab official in 1900 was more likely to speak Turkish, and to send his son to study in Istanbul at one of the new academies, than his predecessor would have been one hundred years prior. This helps explain why, the myth

<sup>16</sup> Here I am speaking of Greater Syria and of Iraq. Egypt had been under British occupation since 1882 and thus had a rather different history.

of Lawrence of Arabia notwithstanding, the vast majority of Arabs remained loyal to the empire till the very end.

This loyalty left the Arab world singularly ill equipped to deal with the changes that were suddenly thrust upon it in the wake of World War I. Not only was it forcibly cut off from the state that had defined its political existence for the past four hundred years; it also had to contend with an unprecedented level of Great Power involvement in the region as the British and the French went about establishing their respective spheres of influence. In the critical days and months following the Ottoman defeat in 1918, the Arabs failed to produce a leader of Atatürk's caliber. This could not have been simply a coincidence. The political class was, in the end, a provincial elite that did not have the same habits of leadership the Turks possessed. Even worse, draconian Ottoman policies against Arab nationalists during World War I had created tremendous polarization (some of those executed were the relatives of older, more conservative politicians who supported the empire), and this made solidarity against Western imperialism even harder to accomplish.

Finally, an effective response was hampered by the intense localism of Arab elites. Part of this was due to the opportunities presented by imperial rivalries in the region. The Syrian leadership, for example, was eager to cooperate with the British in the hope that they would pressure the French to leave Syria. But the Palestinians thought the Syrians should resolutely confront the British plan to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine. However, the localism ran deeper than the dilemmas of the moment.

This essay began with an Ottoman scribe explaining the conditions of animal husbandry on the island of Limnos

to his superiors back in Istanbul. Even during the ambitious nineteenth century, when the state worked to create a more unified society, the Ottomans were always very willing to accommodate local realities and to work with homegrown elites. This style of rule encouraged a corresponding provincialism on the part of the Arabs. The men who directed their societies in the waning decades of the empire knew how to mediate local concerns, but they found it very difficult to respond to broader crises, such as the imposition of European mandates throughout the Near East. Their inability to resist Western colonialism would have serious and fateful consequences that are still with us today.

*The  
Ottoman  
experience*