PART I

The Formation of the Modern State System

Discussing the foundations of modern Middle Eastern politics is a fraught process. Deciding what factors have been more influential than others can lead to erroneous conclusions or, worse, determinism. Part I of this volume does not argue that the historic context presented here constitutes the sole factors shaping modern Middle Eastern politics. What it does argue is that there have been important legacies of the periods outlined below, particularly in terms of the formation of states in the region, the influence of religion in politics and the contests over identity and legitimacy.

In this regard, Part I differs from many texts in that it emphasises particular historic periods over others. In particular, it places greater emphasis on the legacies of the Ottoman period than is often done in modern political histories of the Middle East. This is particularly so where Chapter 1 outlines the reform period in the late Ottoman Empire and the interaction between the Empire, its subjects and Europe. In this regard, this volume argues that this period is of equal importance to that of the colonial period, discussed in Chapter 2.

From here, Part I moves to examine the influence of external and internal factors on how Middle Eastern politics was shaped through the 20th century. In Chapter 3, a focus on the dynamics of the Cold War highlights how, contrary to the assumed dynamic of the time, Middle Eastern states and communities were not passive players in this global ‘Great Game’ between the United States and the Soviet Union. Instead, local actors and regimes were able to exploit and even manipulate great power patrons to their own advantage, helping secure their rule and advance their strategic interests. In a similar vein, the examination of the main ideological currents in the Middle East through the 20th and into the
21st centuries, nationalism and Islamism, highlights the interplay between local, regional and global forces that have helped shape the region we see today.

In this regard, this volume seeks where possible to avoid a simple chronological outline of key events. As a result, there is a degree of overlap between the themes covered in each of the chapters. This is intentional, as key events have had multiple meanings in relation to different issues. For instance, the Arab–Israeli conflict or the Islamic Revolution in Iran mean different things for different groups both in the Middle East, and those outside the region. As such, this volume presents an innovative way of viewing the course of events in the Middle East, one that casts new light on regional politics.

No volume can give an exhaustive account of all the factors that have shaped regional politics. However, it is hoped that this context will give readers a fresh set of tools for understanding the immensely complex political dynamics of the modern Middle East, themes explored in Part II.
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The Ottoman Empire and its Legacy in the Middle East

Learning Objectives
This chapter will enable a greater understanding of:

- The importance of religion and empire in the pre-Ottoman Middle East.
- The diversity of ethnic and religious communities in the Middle East.
- The ruling structures of the Ottoman Empire and their legacies for politics in the modern Middle East.
- The impacts of political and economic reforms during the late Ottoman period for states in the Middle East.
- The role of the military in politics in the Ottoman Empire and the influence of this today.
- The development of colonialism and economic dependency during the late Ottoman period and how this shaped Middle Eastern interactions with the outside world.

TIMELINE

70 CE: Roman conquest of the Jewish kingdom in Palestine
325 CE: Adoption of the Nicene Creed as the official Christian profession of faith
622 CE: The Muslim community flees Mecca for Medina (hijra)
630 CE: The Muslim community return to Mecca
632–61: The Rashidun Caliphate (Mecca)

661–750: The Umayyad Caliphate (Damascus)
756–1031: The Umayyad Caliphate in Cordoba (Cordoba)
750–1258: The Abbasid Caliphate (Baghdad)
910–1171: The Fatimid Caliphate (Mahdia to 969, Cairo)
1250–1517: The Mamluk Caliphate (Baghdad)

(Continued)
1517–1923: The Ottoman Caliphate (Constantinople)  
1536: First of the Capitulations Treaties signed between France and the Ottoman Empire  
1798: Napoleon’s landing in Egypt  
1805–49: Muhammad `Ali’s rule in Egypt  
1834: Introduction of the tanzimat reforms  
1876: Introduction of the first Ottoman constitution  
1878: Suspension of the Ottoman constitution  
1881: Creation of the Ottoman Public Debt Administration (OPDA)  
1881: Creation of the Ottoman Public Debt Administration (OPDA)  
1909: Reintroduction of the Ottoman constitution  
1909–13: CUP control of Ottoman government

INTRODUCTION

The pre-colonial, imperial history of the Middle East is often discounted as simply a long trajectory of decline that left the Middle East open for colonial exploitation. Whilst there is some truth in this, the pre-colonial period left profound legacies for the political, social and economic landscape of the region, legacies that intertwined with and often outlasted patterns of colonial rule in the modern Middle East. In particular, the slow decline of the Ottoman Empire and its efforts to resist territorial losses, economic decline, cultural malaise and the emergence of new identities and allegiances had immense impacts on the region. Through a brief overview of the people, identities and religions of the region this chapter will explore the patterns of Ottoman rule and its legacies. Understanding the legacies of the imperial era in the Middle East allows a greater comprehension of the impacts of colonialism and the formation of the state system in the region.

THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE IMPERIAL ERA

The Ottoman Empire was a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional realm. It reached its peak between the 17th and 18th centuries, during which time it developed an elaborate set of policies to manage relations between the many groups it ruled to ensure their political and economic representation, as well as to prevent challenges to its character as a Muslim Empire. This was challenging as the Empire
ruled over a domain stretching throughout the Middle East, North Africa and into Southeastern Europe. This section will outline and discuss the religious and ethnic composition of the Ottoman Empire, with a focus on the Middle East and North African territories under Ottoman rule. This will include a brief discussion of the Middle East’s religious heritage as the birthplace of the three dominant monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the role of religious identity in the late Ottoman period, and the intersection of this with the emerging ideologies of ethnically based national identity.

THE MIDDLE EAST’S RELIGIOUS AND IMPERIAL HERITAGE

The Middle East is the cradle of the three monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The common theme of monotheism, or belief in one God, along with their shared history in the Middle East, has tied these religious traditions together. They share a number of features outside this central tenet of monotheism, particularly in a focus on law, social justice and eschatology (life after death). In addition, religion and religious identity have been a key theme of Middle Eastern political life to today.

Judaism

The Jewish community traces its heritage to the 2nd millennium BCE. According to Jewish tradition, Abraham, as patriarch of both the Jews and Arabs, was directed by God (yahuweth) to move from Harran in northern Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) to the land of Canaan (present-day Israel/Palestine). Here, the children of Abraham’s grandson Jacob would establish the 12 tribes of Israel that would form the basis of the Jewish community before, during and after its exile and return from Egypt around the mid-13th century BCE. Between the 13th and 5th centuries BCE, the Jewish community would develop the core features of the faith, characterised by a focus on law and the inviolability of the oneness of God (Bayme, 1997: 282).

In addition, the Jewish community would pass through periods of self-rule, occupation and finally conquest at the hands of the Roman Empire in the year 70 CE and the imposition of Roman control over the former Jewish kingdom on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. From this point, the Jews became a diaspora community throughout the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and later North America, Australia and elsewhere. This dispersal of the community would lead to the development of a range of different traditions, each of which referential to the core tenets of the Jewish faith.
The People of the Book (ahl al-kitab) is an Arabic term, referred to in the Qur’an, used to refer to the believers of the non-Muslim monotheistic faiths (Jews and Christians). The ‘book’ (kitab) is reference to the shared tradition of reverence for revealed scripture contained within a holy text (Torah, Bible, Qur’an). It was a concept developed by successive Islamic empires to show preference for these communities over followers of polytheistic faiths.

Christianity

In these latter years of independent Jewish rule, Christianity emerged as the second great monotheistic faith in the Middle East. Christianity was a faith founded by Jesus of Nazareth who was acclaimed as anointed by God by his followers as part of God’s earlier covenants with the prophets Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The designation ‘Christ’ is a translation from the Greek khrístos or ‘annointed’ and translated from the Hebrew mashiah. As such, Christianity, or the followers of Jesus Christ, emerged directly out of Jewish tradition and clashed with both the Jewish religious hierarchy as well as the Roman state religious doctrine of polytheism.

Here, a key difference between Judaism and Christianity is worth noting in that the former developed alongside the establishment of a political entity in the first Jewish kingdom and its successors whilst the latter developed as a small sectarian movement with no political authority. Whilst this would change in the 4th century CE with the adoption of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire under Emperor Constantine, references to specific prescriptions for political rule in Christianity are negligible compared to the elaborate legal system contained within Jewish doctrine. This would be a process formalised later with the various church councils convened by the Romans from the 4th century CE.

Islam

Indeed, the relationship between religion and politics highlights a closer connection between Judaism and the other great monotheistic faith to emerge from the Middle East, Islam. Judaism and Islam both seek to grapple directly and explicitly with the issue of temporal political authority and understand the relationship of this to spiritual authority and faith. Islam was founded by the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century CE in the Hijaz, or the western Arabian Peninsula. After having developed a well-established trading network in the city of Mecca, Muhammad is said to have received direct revelation from God (allah) that was documented in the Qur’an (recitation or reading) as the direct word of God. The Qur’an developed over a number of years as Muhammad received more revelations. It is here that the relationship between Islam and politics began to develop through two distinct phases (Lapidus, 2002: 18–30).
The Caliphates

- The Rashidun Caliphate (632–661)
- The Umayyad Caliphate (661–750)
- The Umayyad Caliphate in Cordoba (756–1031)
- The ‘Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258)
- The Fatimid Caliphate (910–1171)
- The Mamluk Caliphate (1250–1517)
- The Ottoman Caliphate (1517–1923)

In this first phase, Muhammad drew a small group of followers to this new faith, but also drew the hostility of the authorities in Mecca, who saw the monotheistic message as a challenge to the dominant polytheistic practice in the region, as well as the themes of social justice as a challenge to their economic dominance of the region. This led to increasingly direct persecution of the community before it fled to the city of Medina in the year 622 ce. From here, Muhammad and his community grew, quickly becoming the dominant force in the city. It was during this second period that revelation and its documentation in the Qur’an began to deal explicitly with political matters as it was now the governing authority of a nascent political community.

Selections from the Constitution of Medina

- They are one community (ummah) to the exclusion of all men.
- God’s protection is one, the least of them may give protection to a stranger on their behalf. Believers are friends one to the other to the exclusion of outsiders.
- Yathrib [Medina] shall be a sanctuary for the people of this document.
- If any dispute or controversy likely to cause trouble should arise it must be referred to God and to Muhammad the apostle of God.
- The Jews of al-Aus, their freed men and themselves have the same standing with the people of this document in purely loyalty from the people of this document.


In addition to the increasingly specific revelations regulating the politics of the Muslim community, Muhammad also developed the Constitution of Medina (al-dustur al-madina), an agreement between the leader of the Muslim community and all the major tribes of the city including all Muslims as well as the significant Jewish population, the smaller Christian population, as well as the polytheist community. This model sought
to replace tribal ties with membership in the Islamic community (\textit{ummah}) with concurrent equal citizenship rights, to ensure religious freedoms within the community whilst positioning the head of the Muslim community as the head of the political community, to install a new taxation system that would alleviate social inequalities, and to allow for the accession of new groups. As such, this act and the context that it was articulated in, established a sense of unitary Islamic identity as well as a mode of Islamic governance that would incorporate a variety of other religions (Lapidus, 2002: 18–30).

Today, it is estimated there are 1.57 billion Muslims globally, the world’s second largest religion, with the vast majority of the Muslim global community (\textit{ummah}) living outside the Middle East and North Africa (estimated 25%, or 407 million Muslims in the Middle East). Of this community, the majority are of the Sunni branch of the faith (85%–90%). Iran, Iraq and Bahrain have Shi`a majority communities with significant Shi`a communities in Lebanon, Yemen, Kuwait and Turkey.

This was not without challenge. Indeed, a number of Jewish tribes in Medina resisted the new government, leading to an unsuccessful rebellion and their exile from the city. In addition, the dominant tribes of Mecca, concerned about the emergence of a new regional centre of authority, engaged in a series of battles with the new community between 624 and 629 ce. Ultimately, the Muslim community defeated the Meccan forces and united the tribes of the western Arabian Peninsula under the banner of Islam by the time of the Prophet’s death in 632 ce.

\textbf{Islamic Empires}

Challenges to the rapid growth of Islam as a religion and empire across the Middle East were not exclusively external. Contest over succession to Muhammad led to the outbreak of civil war over the method of selecting the leader of the community. The first three successors to Muhammad, Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman, served to balance claims to succession based on political and economic ascendancy as opposed to lineage and proximity to Muhammad. These tensions broke open with the appointment of Ali as successor (\textit{caliph}) in 656 ce, leading to challenges from members of the formally dominant Quraysh tribe, members of whom had been appointed to prominent political positions across the growing Islamic empire. Ali was assassinated in 661 ce, seeing leadership pass to Mu`awiyah, a member of the Quraysh and governor of the Syrian territories conquered from the Byzantines. The supporters of Ali (\textit{shi`atu `ali} or Shi`a) continued to rebel against this new government and were largely marginalised over the ensuing five centuries whilst the majority of the community (calling themselves the \textit{`ahl us-sunnah wa`l-gama`ah} or Sunni) gave their allegiance to Mu`awiyah and the newly established Umayyad caliphate.
The Umayyad caliphate, built on the conquests of the first Islamic empire and its immediate successors, spread its rule from the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant through North Africa, Andalusia (modern-day Spain) and east to the borders of India by the mid-8th century CE. Here, the Middle East, with the exception of Byzantine-held Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) became ruled by a succession of Islamic empires until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. This saw the region’s political practices, symbology, literature, art and all other fields heavily imbued with reference to Islam, even when this was not specifically referential to religion. The glories of this period, particularly the ‘Abbasid ‘Golden Age’ between the 8th and 13th centuries CE put the Middle East at the centre of technological, artistic and political advancement. Nostalgia for this period, and discussions of how the Middle East and the Islamic world was challenged and increasingly dominated by the European colonial powers by the 18th and 19th centuries, is a common reference point for the emergence of modern political dialogue in the region and still shapes many discussions today (Donner in Esposito, 1999; Lapidus, 2002: 67–80).

THE PEOPLE OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

Of the imperial rulers in the Middle East, it was the Ottomans who arguably left the most lasting political, economic and social legacy in the region. The Empire, founded in the 14th century CE in Anatolia before the conquest of the Byzantine capital at Constantinople (renamed Istanbul) in 1453 CE, was based on the military might of the Turkish population who had migrated from Central Asia and converted to Islam from the 9th century CE. Between the 14th and 16th centuries, the Ottoman Empire expanded to control the Fertile Crescent, the Red Sea coast, the North African coast to modern-day Morocco, all of Anatolia and all of the Balkan Peninsula, famously pushing to the gates of Vienna twice, in 1529 and 1683 CE.
The *Millet System*

Across this vast territory, the Empire ruled over a variety of ethnic groups such as the Turks, Arabs, Tartars, Kurds, Turkomans, Berbers, Bosnians, Albanians, Greeks, Bulgarians, Armenians and Georgians, amongst many others. However, religion was used as the primary tool of personal identification in the Empire. This was institutionalised in the *millet system*, a method of administration where the non-Muslim population of the Empire was organised according to religious affiliation.

Here, the *millet* system established categories for the Greek Orthodox, the Armenian (including Armenian Catholic, Evangelical and Apostolic), the Syriac Orthodox and the Jewish communities. This system was designed to ensure their protection as each community would exercise its own personal status law as administered by the relevant religious authorities. Whilst this was an exercise in promoting a sense of equality, the *millet system* contained within it an institutionalisation of preferential treatment for the Muslim citizens of the Empire until the *tanzimat* reforms of the 19th century discussed below. Up to this point, all disputes between non-Muslims (*dhimmi*) and Muslims were to be administered under Muslim law,

![Expansion of the Ottoman Empire, 14th to 17th centuries CE](image)

*Figure 1.2* Expansion of the Ottoman Empire, 14th to 17th centuries CE

Source: Naqshbandi.org
non-Muslims could not officially hold positions within the imperial government (although many non-Muslims held critical advisory roles throughout the history of the Empire), and non-Muslims had to pay a tax, the čizya.

Somewhat ironically, for the bulk of its history the Ottoman Empire had a minority Muslim population. Until the loss of the majority of its European territories through the 19th century, the population of the Empire peaked at over 70 million inhabitants, with an estimated 40 million members the various non-Muslim millets. On the eve of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and after the bulk of its European and North African territories had been excised by the European powers, the population stood at an estimated 20 million. Of this, an estimated 15 million, or 75% were Muslim; 1.8 million, or 9% were Greek Orthodox; 1.3 million, or 7% were Armenian; 190,000, or 1% were Jewish; with the remainder being a range of smaller groups, largely members of Eastern Christian churches (Lapidus, 2002: 265).

The term millet comes from the Arabic millah (nation). The enshrinement of religious identification as the source of personal law has its roots in pre-Ottoman imperial rule, but was formalised during the tanzimat reform period (1839–76). Until the rise of ‘Ottomanism’ during the 19th century and efforts to formalise equality for all members of the Empire, the millet system worked to both protect religious identity and enshrine Muslim predominance.

THE EMERGENCE OF NATIONAL IDENTITIES

Ethnic identity was present, in one form or another, throughout the Ottoman Empire. In particular, language as a vehicle of identity helped define and categorise the many communities within the Empire. However, ethnicity as the primary form of identity, or what we know commonly today as national identity, only began to crystallise amongst communities in the Empire during the mid- to late-19th century CE. As with most nationalist doctrines, the emergence of national identities in the region materialised largely in response to challenges from other groups, particularly from Europe. In this dynamic, contemporary Turkish and Arab identity developed together.

Origins of Turkish National Identity

The origins of contemporary Turkish identity grew not from a specific government policy but from education and economic interactions between the Ottoman Empire and Europe. Here, the ideas of nationalism as an identity that superseded both
religious and, later, imperial allegiance would take root in the Anatolian Peninsula and, consequently, across the Middle East. Whilst we will discuss this in more detail in Chapter 4, nationalism can be briefly defined as an ideology that focuses on the unity and equality of all members of an ethnic or cultural community, with the aim that these communities, or nations, would be represented by their own nation-state.

This quintessentially modern form of political organisation was born out of the French Revolution in the late 18th century and quickly spread through Europe and North America before finding its way to the Middle East, largely through Turkish and Arabic scholars and military officers in training who were studying at European institutions through the 19th century. Initially, early ideas of national identity in the Ottoman Empire sought to preserve the multi-ethnic character of the Empire. This was articulated through the various strands of the ‘Young Ottoman’ movement where the central idea was one of allegiance to the Ottoman ‘homeland’ regardless of religious affiliation (Kayali, 1997: 18).

Whilst this became formalised through the various reform processes during the 19th century, it also led to a sharpening of ethnic divides within the Empire, largely between the dominant Turkish communities and their representatives in the higher ranks of the Ottoman military and the Arab community in the south of the Empire. This saw the idea of Ottoman nationalism, or ‘Ottomanism’, decline through the 19th century to be replaced by an increasingly potent sense of Turkish and Arab identity. Turkish ethnic identity crystallised with the Young Turk movement, an amalgam of various protest movements seeking the implementation of a constitutional regime to temper the power of then-Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876–1909) that had grown as a result of the centralisation policies of the tanzimat.

Indeed, Abdul Hamid had dissolved the former Ottoman constitution and parliament in 1878. Whilst it was made up of a number of groups both inside and outside the Empire, its driving force were European-educated army officers largely from the Third Army in Salonika. Their pressure on the Sultan led to the reinstatement of the constitution in 1908. In 1909, counter-protests erupted amongst conscript soldiers and members of the religious establishment calling for the

![Figure 1.3](https://example.com/image1.png)

**Figure 1.3** Intellectual, artist and Turkish nationalist, Osman Hamdi Bey (1842–1910)

*Source: Public domain*
constitution to be dissolved and religious law to be introduced. These protests were also an effort to counter what was seen as an increasing Europeanisation of the political life of the Empire through this officer corps. In response, the officers confronted the Sultan, who they claimed had stirred this unrest, and forced him from office, replacing him with Mehmet V as a figurehead for a new military-backed regime (Allen Butler, 2011: 37).

Whilst the protest movement initially also included a range of other voices, the military leadership through the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP), founded in 1889, soon took full control of the new government. In their efforts at reforming the government between 1909 and 1913, the CUP slashed the bureaucracy, targeting high-ranking Arab officials in the name of enhancing efficiency. This saw the increasing alienation of both the civil service and the Arabs more generally from the imperial authority in the lead-up to World War I.

This fracturing of Ottoman authority was accelerated by a loosening of controls over press censorship that allowed for both greater criticism of the government and for the articulation of counter-narratives, particularly through the emergence of a greater sense of Turkish and Arab nationalism based on linguistic unity around the key urban areas in Anatolia and the Arab east. This was also compounded by the increasing interference of the British and French in the Ottoman-held Arab territories in the Levant and Arabian Peninsula.
In this regard, the CUP and the Young Turk movement more generally were not a nationalist movement as such, at least initially. They saw their heritage in line with their predecessor movement in the Young Ottomans, and sought the promotion of a multi-confessional sense of Ottomanism. However, as they oversaw the steady erosion of Ottoman holdings in the Balkans, the idea of a multi-confessional identity become increasingly moot as the Empire was reduced to an Anatolian, largely ethnically Turkish core (with large Armenian, Kurdish and Greek minorities) with a significant Arab southern flank. Indeed, as ethnic identity became increasingly salient in Southeastern Europe, it also began to resonate with the people of the late Ottoman Empire. Coupled with the articulation of a sense of Turkish identity within key elements of the CUP leadership, the movement towards rearticulating the Ottoman Empire as a Turkish domain began to take root (Kayali, 1997: 38).

Origins of Arab National Identity

This struggle between ethnic identity, religious affiliation and regional links is an issue that reflects many of the issues that underlie the fragility of regional identities and political affiliations today. This is particularly so amongst the Arab community where the growth of a unitary identity, particularly in the Arab east, based primarily on linguistic unity has sat in tension with the political division of the region. Whilst a sharper sense of Arab national identity emerged in reaction to the growth of the Young Turk movement and its turn to Turkish nationalism, Arab identity had began to establish itself particularly in the literary and intellectual circles of the main cities of Damascus, Cairo, Baghdad, Beirut and elsewhere through the 19th century (Dawisha, 2003: 14–48).

This notion of Arab identity did not articulate a clear and unified sense of political identity, whether the Arabs should remain part of the Ottoman Empire, whether they should form their own renewed caliphate or republic, or what the territorial limits of their community were. However, the revival and dissemination of literary Arabic in the late 19th century laid the foundations for a cross-confessional sense of Arab identity that would emerge in clearer form in response to the early stages of creeping European colonialism, the final stages of Ottoman decline and the imposition of direct forms of colonial rule during the 20th century.

Arab identity has always been a contested term, and one that seeks to identify elements of unity within a highly culturally and geographically diverse community. The Arab people populate a vast and varied geographic area, stretching from the deserts and mountains of the Arabian Peninsula, through the Fertile Crescent, along the Mediterranean coast from Lebanon through Africa, to the Atlas Mountains of Algeria and Morocco to the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. They are not the sole community in these areas, sharing North Africa with the various Berber (Amazigh) communities and the Levant with other groups such as the
Figure 1.5  Pictured in Damascus, members of *al-Fatat* (Young Arab Society), an association of intellectuals, artists and politicians formed in Paris in 1911. Members of this group would go on to become leading Arab politicians, including Riad as-Solh, the first Prime Minister of Lebanon in 1943 and Shukri al-Quwatli, the first President of Syria in 1943.

*Source: Public domain*

Kurds, a large Armenian diaspora, Greeks, Turkmen, Assyrians, Jews and others. However, they are the dominant community in the region and, up to the early 20th century, in the southern tier of the Ottoman Empire.

Whilst there is religious diversity amongst the Arab people, around 90% of Arabs are Muslim, with the majority of these being Sunni Muslim. Indeed, Arab and Muslim histories are inextricably tied together. The Arab people, prior to the founding of the religion in the 7th century CE, populated the Arabian Peninsula with scattered communities further north across the Levant. It was only with the expansion of the Islamic religion up to the 10th and 11th centuries that the Arab people became the dominant social group in the Middle East and North Africa. However, Arab Christians and Arab Jews have been central players in the political life of the region, including in the development of early nationalist movements.

**Emerging Ethnic and Nationalist Tensions**

This sense of modern Arab national identity grew at the same time and, indeed, in competition with the development of the sense of modern Turkish national
identity. It primarily drew on a shared language and history, even where both of these factors vary for Arabs in Morocco to those in Iraq, Lebanon, or Oman. This balance or, as some historians argue, tension between the broader sense of Arab identity and local identities based around emerging states or tribal/familial associations is a key characteristic of the Arab community (Barakat, 1993: 32–47).

Early manifestations of Arab national identity largely downplayed this due to the immediate sense of confrontation with the increasingly unpopular Ottoman rule. This led to two initial streams of resistance to the Ottomans based on Arab identity, one expressive of ‘traditional’ allegiances as manifested in the Arab Revolt during World War I and another growing out of more secular intellectual groups and movements in the cities of Damascus, Baghdad and Cairo.

Both Turkish and Arab nationalism would become highly influential in the latter years of the Ottoman Empire and immediately after its collapse in the wake of World War I. However, the political trajectory of the region and the allegiances people adhered to have been deeply influenced by the political systems and practices of the Ottoman period. Indeed, the legacies of Ottoman rule in the Middle East continue to be debated by historians, with emergent and recurring patterns in contemporary Middle Eastern politics reflective of the policies of the Empire and their political, economic and social consequences.

THE LEGACY OF OTTOMAN RULE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Whilst the Ottoman legacy in the Middle East was profound, this section will focus on four areas where patterns of Ottoman rule as well as Ottoman engagement with Europe left imprints on the future political, social and economic trajectory of the Middle East. First, the core political institutions of the Empire highlight a tradition of centralised, bureaucratic rule in the region. Second, the Ottoman response to European dominance and development led to a series of policy reforms known as the *tanzimat*. These reforms led to changes in patterns of rule that have
been highly influential for the forms of rule and statehood that emerged in the Middle East during the 20th century. Third, the role of the Ottoman military left an important legacy not just for the way the institution was organised, but for how it saw its role in politics and as a vehicle for change, by force if necessary. Fourth, the Ottoman economic dependency on Europe that emerged through the 19th century has helped shape the pattern of contemporary economic relations between the Middle East and the outside world, as well as fostering particularly sharp resentment of consistent external interference in the region.

OTTOMAN RULE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Ottoman rule went through various phases, but maintained core institutional elements over the seven centuries it dominated the Middle East. Here, three institutions were central: the Sultan, the Grand Vizier and the Grand Mufti. The Sultan sat atop the ruling hierarchy in the Ottoman Empire. This was a title inherited from the Seljuqs to denote the ruler of a Muslim Empire who did not claim the caliphate, or succession to the Prophet Muhammad. However, Sultan Selim I (1512–20) induced the former claimants, the remnants of the ’Abbasid dynasty, to cede their claims to the Ottoman ruler with the Ottoman defeat of the Egyptian-based Mamluk Empire in 1517 ce, where the former imperial dynasty had sought refuge.

The degree of authority wielded by the Sultan varied during the course of the Empire; however, the Sultan’s court (saray) and his high officers held considerable sway over decision-making during the lifespan of the Ottoman Empire. The saray was the centre of government and also served as a training ground for administrators and military officers who governed the Empire. The Ottomans sought to implement an increasingly centralised bureaucracy, particularly during and after the 19th century ce, administered through the saray with the Grand Vizier at its head. The day-to-day political affairs of the government were administered by the Grand Vizier, a position roughly equivalent to a modern-day prime minister (Ágoston and Masters, 2009: 617). Whilst the Vizier wielded

Figure 1.7  Ahmed Tewfik Pasha (1845–1936), the last Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire

Source: Public domain
considerable power, he was also vulnerable as scapegoat should there be outbreaks of public discontent or major government failures. This was an all-too common theme towards the latter decades of the Empire, leading to greater political instability and further vulnerability of the Empire to external and internal challenges.

The Ottoman government sought to regulate religion, specifically Islam, across the Empire through the religious establishment headed by the Grand Mufti, or sheikh al-`ulama. The Empire’s private law code was run according to religious identity in line with the categories of the millet system. Outside of this, Islamic law (shari`ah) was dominant, administered by religiously educated judges, or qadi. The Grand Mufti had the power to appoint the qadi as well as the extraordinary power to veto any other ruling of the government, even one issued by the Sultan, should he deem it contradictory to the shari`ah. However, as the Mufti was appointed by the Sultan and served at his pleasure, there are no notable instances where the Sultan’s authority was challenged in this way (Ágoston and Masters, 2009: 617).

THE TANZIMAT REFORMS AND ‘MODERNISATION’

It was the last decades of Ottoman rule, and the reforms undertaken during this time to stem the territorial losses and increasing economic dependency on Europe, that left the most pronounced legacy on the contemporary Middle East. As the borders of the Empire contracted, the imperial administration in Istanbul sought to impose a greater degree of centralised control over the remaining territory. This was an effort to mirror the centralised bureaucracies of the European powers, an effort at political modernisation. In particular, the imperial government sought to extend its control over education, charity and social services, areas that were previously the almost exclusive domain of local administrations.

The Tanzimat

The centrepiece of this centralisation programme was the tanzimat (reorganisation). The tanzimat were a series of often disorganised policy programmes designed to ensure the territorial integrity of the Empire against both external threats and internal rebellions as well as to reinvigorate the Ottoman economy and free it from its increasing dependency on Europe. The mechanisms for achieving this focussed on tax standardisation, the enshrinement of private property rights, a centralisation of the bureaucracy and the introduction of conscription. In essence, it broadened the role of the Ottoman state considerably, granting it a presence in many areas that had previously been delegated to local notables, religious institutions and the private sphere (Finkel, 2007: 3).
The **tanzimat** (reorganisation) reforms were an effort to resist increasing European dominance whilst emulating more effective European models of rule. It symbolised efforts to reform the administration of the Empire towards notions of citizenship, modernisation of the finance system and strengthening the institution of the military. It had some success in developing a more effective centralised rule; however this also bred greater resentment of the increasingly powerful position of the Sultan. Ultimately, these reforms could not prevent the external and internal pressures that led to the collapse of the Empire after World War I.

The reforms sought to standardise and centralise the structure of the Empire through the imposition of new administrative units, the **vilayets** (provinces). This effort at standardisation was introduced with the first set of reforms in 1834. In the areas closest to the Ottoman capital (Anatolia and the Balkans), relatively centralised administration could be implemented. However, in the more peripheral **vilayets** (notably around Cairo, Baghdad, Algiers, Tunis and even Aleppo and Damascus), the Ottomans sought to rule through local leaders and administration functioned around and through these local urban centres. This led to the creation of some sense of political community based on these areas. In particular, Egypt remained a distinct cultural and, at times, political entity drawing particularly on its Mamluk heritage (Lapidus, 2002: 354–8).

This had a myriad of effects across the Empire. In terms of education, many Ottoman public servants were dispatched to European learning institutions to acquire necessary skills for these new tasks. In this environment, these new public servants, as well as the officer class, encountered a variety of new political ideologies that would shape regional political discourse through the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Here, nationalism, socialism and the principles of industrialisation would begin to take root amongst the political elites across the Middle East. The general increase in the size of the public service in the late Ottoman Empire saw this sector become the primary avenue for social mobility (Evered, 2012). This was a critical change for the social patterns of the Middle East where social mobility previously had been hindered by the hierarchical nature of the imperial system. Now, the institutions of state allowed those who had previously been excluded from access to political and economic advancement the chance for greater social mobility.

**The Reform Process and the Decline of Ottoman Authority**

This played into the fraying of Ottoman authority outside the core territories in Anatolia and the Levant. For instance, in seeking to mitigate the growth of opposition across its vast territory, the reforms also developed a new system of
provincial administration. This new system was, in varying degrees, later used by the European powers as a framework for the colonial division of the Arab Middle East. Prior to the 19th century, the provincial policy focussed on building Ottoman authority around pre-existing administrative areas. Here, the Sultan’s sons were allocated provinces (sanıcks) and acted as governors (beylerbeys) which they ruled in conjunction with high-ranking military officers (sanıakbeys) (Ágoston and Masters, 2009: 616).

Regionalism and Centralisation

Despite efforts to maintain links back to the central government, this system tended to emphasise the role of particular urban areas and the links between these areas and their immediate hinterlands (i.e. Cairo to Egypt, Damascus to the Levant and Baghdad to the Tigris–Euphrates river valley). Control was often divided between local leaders and Ottoman officials, with Ottoman control greatest in the urban areas and local autonomy asserting itself most in the rural areas. In the 18th and 19th centuries, despite these efforts at centralisation, Ottoman control over these areas waned, and the local authorities and elites began to assert themselves over the local population (Quataert, 2007: 90–110).

This was fostered by the ideological growth of the notion of nationalism imported from Europe which accompanied the increasing European interventions in the Empire. However, this notion of national identity was tempered by the strong presence of family and region-based allegiances which were deeply influential over social and political organisation across the region. The reform process was further complicated due to the lack of strong political institutions outside the personalised rule of the Sultan and the Grand Vizier. Here, efforts were made to construct new political institutions that would, on one hand, address the growing calls for political representation and, on the other, reinforce the need for greater centralised rule in the face of both internal and external challenges. In this regard, efforts were made to introduce a parliament in the latter stages of the Empire.

The 1876 constitution introduced a two-chamber parliament, guarantees on freedom of religion and a gesture towards a formal division of powers. However, the Sultan retained control over all core political and economic decisions, without the need to consult with the newly formed
parliament. This qualification undermined the ability of this new institution to serve as a formal mechanism for popular will, compounded by the deteriorating relations between the central government and the regions on the periphery of the Empire who saw little incentive in participating in a process that might hinder their own chances at greater autonomy or independence.

Therefore, the overarching theme of the late Ottoman period was an effort to centralise the rule of the imperial government. It was hoped that implementing this programme as a form of political modernisation would stem the territorial losses of the Empire, insulate it against further economic and cultural penetration and preserve it into the future. Whilst this failed, with Ottoman involvement in World War I leading to the collapse of the Empire, it did leave a legacy for the successor states across the region.

This is particularly so in terms of total, direct rule backed by a large military and state bureaucracy and the emerging political model. As the late imperial administration pursued a policy of centralisation, tensions arose as established patterns of social and economic authority were increasingly challenged across the Middle East. This was particularly so in the outlying provinces where the imperial administration struggled to impose centralised rule whilst not alienating local elites, for fear of their involvement in challenges to an already fragile government in Istanbul (Palmer, 2011).

THE MILITARY AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY

The role of the military as an institution was a central part of the functioning of the Empire. Indeed, succession to the throne in the Ottoman Empire was a process deeply embedded in the military institution as well as through the direct use of violence. Unlike many other empires, the Ottoman throne did not automatically pass to the eldest son of the monarch. Instead the Sultan’s sons were sent to various parts of the Empire to act as governors and receive a military and political education. Upon the death of the Sultan, each of the sons would engage in a contest for the throne, with the position passing to the victor (Quataert, 2007).

During the reign of Sultan Mehmet II (1451–81), this process took a more violent turn. After acceding to the throne, Mehmet ordered the execution of all his brothers as a means to ensure that there would be no direct challenge to his rule. This act of fratricide became institutionalised through to the 17th century CE before giving way to succession of the throne to the eldest male in the royal family. However, whilst the act of fratricide did not continue, all males in the royal family were cloistered in the royal palace, away from potential political activity. This process mirrored the changing nature of the Empire, where
militaristic expansion ceased during the 17th and 18th centuries, and the Sultan assumed a less martial role in favour of maintaining the political status quo through symbolic power.

The Military and Politics in the Ottoman Empire

With the change away from the use of fratricide came many more challenges, often successful, to the rule of the Sultan. However, this did not see a collapse of the system, as challenges all emerged from within the key institution of the royal household. This highlights continuity to today in terms of the rotation of leadership in many regional states, particularly during the Cold War, without real changes to the patterns of rule or systems of governance. Here, the institution of the military provided those who would emerge to challenge existing authority.

The increased power of the military in the latter period of the Ottoman Empire, particularly the role of the military in sponsoring political and economic reforms, established a pattern whereby regional militaries have continued to intervene in politics since independence (Quataert, 2007: 90–110). This has been somewhat of a contradictory pattern whereby the military has seen itself as the champion of modernisation and Western-style reforms (such as bureaucratisation and industrialisation), whilst at the same time being an institution that, when taking control of the state, has articulated a foreign policy hostile to Western powers. In many ways it was this dependency on the European powers during the latter years of the Ottoman Empire, and the humiliation that this brought, that fostered a sense of resentment combined with a desire for emulation.

Muhammad `Ali in Egypt

This dynamic can be seen in the reforms in Egypt under Muhammad `Ali in the early 19th century. War between Britain and Napoleonic France raged across Europe in the late 18th and early 19th century. In 1798, this conflict came to Egypt in the form of a French expeditionary force which sought to disrupt British maritime dominance of the Mediterranean and disrupt their links to the growing colonial holdings in India. The French presence in Egypt ended at the hands of a joint British–Ottoman action in 1801. Muhammad `Ali, an Albanian officer in the Ottoman forces, quickly emerged as the dominant force and imposed his rule in the vacuum left by the French withdrawal and the inability of the Ottomans to subsequently assert their direct authority over the increasingly independent territory.

Over the next 40 years, `Ali, who remained under nominal Ottoman authority, thoroughly reformed both the military and political institutions in Egypt, introduced programmes of economic development and industrialisation, and even waged a series of campaigns against the government in Istanbul that saw him
gain control over the Sudan, the Hijaz and the eastern shore of the Mediterranean.

The Impacts of Muhammad `Ali’s Reforms
Whilst `Ali’s rule did not see the introduction of a pluralist political system, preferring to seek the establishment of a dynasty in Egypt, his reforms of the military and his use of the military as the engine of political, economic and social reorganisation in Egypt set a trend for others ruling in the peripheries of the Empire as well as for post-independence rulers in the Middle East. The Ottoman and Mamluk military establishment that dominated Egypt prior to the 19th century was completely dismantled in favour of a new organisation built directly on the European model.

To facilitate this, officers were sent to Europe for training whilst the government contributed massive resources to the development of an educational infrastructure that could support, at first, military training and then broader education in the future. Here, the military-led model of development established by `Ali would be replicated in the last years of the Ottoman Empire and during the early years of independence through the 20th century.

The success of Muhammad `Ali’s reforms and the strength of the military as the vehicle for modernisation prompted international intervention in 1841 when the British, concerned about the growing power of this new regime, cooperated with the Ottomans in defeating `Ali’s forces in Syria and forced him to withdraw back to

Figure 1.9 Muhammad Ali (1769–1849), ruler of Egypt from 1805 to 1849, led a series of modernising reforms in Egypt. These reforms continue to define the place of this institution in Egyptian society and its relationship to politics. `Ali broke from Ottoman rule in the early 19th century, conquering the territories of today’s Sudan, Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, western Syria, the western and central Arabian Peninsula and parts of Anatolia, Cyprus and Greece before being forced, with British and French backing, to resubmit to Ottoman authority.

Source: Public domain
Egypt. The British intervention was based on their concern over the instability it had caused in the region, potentially undermining the viability of the increasingly weak Ottoman Empire and raising the fear of regional instability that would disrupt trade and disrupt British links to India (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009: 64–74). As a result, the British imposed a settlement that not only limited the size of the Egyptian military and placed it back under Ottoman control, but also forced the Ottoman government to accept a series of economic reforms that allowed for European control over the Ottoman economy. The once-great Empire was increasingly living up to its moniker as the ‘sick man of Europe’.

**EUROPE AND THE OTTOMAN ‘SICK MAN’**

It was as early as 1536 that the Ottomans, under Sultan Suleiman I, signed the first of what would become known as the ‘Capitulations Treaties’ with the European powers. This treaty, signed with France, created a fifth category in the *millet* system for French citizens, largely Catholic, who had taken up residence in the Empire. This group would be tax exempt and answerable to the French king via the French ambassador. Whilst this was a reciprocal process, there was little in the way of movement of Ottomans to Europe, representative of the dominance of the Empire at the time (Palmer, 2011).

The capitulations (*ahdânes*) were a series of bilateral treaties that granted exemptions from taxes and other liabilities for the subjects of European empires or their representatives in the Ottoman Empire. Signed between the 16th and 19th centuries, the treaties bestowed autonomy on these groups allowing the European powers to gain control over trade with the Ottoman Empire.

Over the intervening centuries the British, Dutch and others also signed these treaties with the Empire, seeing the growing expatriate communities take increasing control over the Ottoman export market. This process accelerated through the 18th and 19th centuries whereby the European states began to grant citizenship to particular
non-Muslim groups within the Empire under the auspices of these treaties. This broadened out further as the European powers, as well as Russia, claimed the right of protection over particular non-Muslim communities throughout the Empire. As such, the sovereignty of the Sultan over his subjects was steadily eroding whilst the economy of the Empire became increasingly dependent on governments in Europe and their protected representatives within the Empire.

In response, the Empire sought to implement economic reforms that would counter this trend. The logic behind the first foreign loans was two-fold: to finance immediate war efforts, particularly in the Crimea, and to foster development that would lead to greater revenues in the future. However, the continuation of hostilities, lack of spending and the intent of foreign powers to gain greater control over the Ottoman economy led to the failure of these efforts to reform the Ottoman financial system. This was further hindered by the territorial scope of the Empire making it difficult to implement consistent taxation collection, combined with the increasing economic dependency on European industry and manufactured goods (Kasaba, 1988).

Economic stagnation saw the Ottomans default on their mounting debts to Europe leading to the creation of the Ottoman Public Debt Administration (OPDA) in 1881. The OPDA was a large organisation, employing over 5000 staff, which was created and controlled by European financial institutions that would manage Ottoman state revenues in exchange for the forgiveness of half of the Ottoman debt and a renegotiation of the remaining liability. The OPDA had enormous powers, including the right to collect tax revenue and distribute this to financers of Ottoman debt as well.

Figure 1.11 A Capitulation Treaty between France and the Ottoman Empire from 1615. These treaties would severely curtail the economic viability of the Ottoman Empire, and lay the groundwork for continued patterns of economic dependency of, first, the Ottoman Empire then, later, Middle Eastern states, on the West

Source: Public domain
as financing development projects. It was run by representatives from Britain, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Austria–Hungary, Germany and a member from the Ottoman private sector.

The Ottoman government was represented on the council, but did not have voting rights. Whilst there was some streamlining of the collection of taxes and spending on development projects, the creation of the OPDA essentially deprived the Empire of an independent source of revenue, leaving it at the mercy of the powers that controlled the OPDA leadership committee. This created a cycle of dependency whereby European states and financial institutions continued to lend to the Empire, backed by OPDA guarantees, and leaving the Empire in greater debt and with greater reliance on the OPDA and its backers.

This was compounded by the terms of trade between the Empire and Europe that were heavily weighted in favour of the Europeans as the Ottomans almost exclusively exported agricultural products and relied on imports of manufactured items. The Ottoman government and, later, the OPDA did implement some development projects. However, such was the dominance of Europe economically that Ottoman industrial development would never have advanced sufficiently to alter this situation. Indeed, the fact that the Ottoman economy was controlled by Europe through the OPDA in its later years effectively prevented this from happening. As such, the situation of economic dependency of the region on Europe was established at this time, and was deeply embedded in the political structures of the region. It also fostered a deep sense of resentment towards the European powers coupled with a desire for independent economic advancement across the Middle East (Kasaba, 1988).

The European powers, informally at first, dealt with the Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire in the establishment of trade relationships. In particular, the use of Ottoman Christian intermediaries greatly enhanced the economic power of these groups within the Empire. This position was enhanced as they were able to gain tax exemptions because of their connections to the increasingly
powerful European markets, enabling them to sell their goods at a cheaper rate than Muslim merchants.

By the late 19th century, a seemingly contradictory political situation prevailed where the Ottoman Empire itself was highly fragile and dependent on European support. However, the size of state institutions had expanded significantly as well as the roles they sought to fulfil. This was particularly so in terms of the army and intelligence services. This fragile, highly militarised and paranoid form of state rule would be replicated across the region on independence. These patterns also set and amplified tension across the region, particularly in terms of religious identification and tension between land-owning elites and the peasantry. In terms of religious identity, the late Ottoman Empire sought to rein in control over the religious authorities across the remainder of the Empire during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This was a move against the traditional structure of the millet system where authority was delegated through local religious leaders.

CONCLUSION

The Ottoman Empire’s legacy is still a point of intense debate. However, the basic importance of this period is undeniable. Whilst centralised and bureaucratic rule, the role of military in politics, economic dependence on Europe and the antagonism this created, cultural influence and resentment and external infiltration are not exclusive to the Middle East, the specifics of Ottoman rule and the intensity of European engagement with the people of the Middle East gave this a particular form. Indeed, many of the core issues that continue to shape Middle Eastern politics grew from this period, and became increasingly salient with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the imposition of colonial rule across the region and the subsequent emergence of the regional state system.

Study Questions

- In what ways has the Middle East’s religious heritage impacted on its political development?
- What factors have impacted on the formation of identities in the pre-colonial Middle East?

(Continued)
Did the structures of Ottoman rule, particularly that of the Sultan and the Grand Vizier, create a legacy of personalised rule in the Middle East?

In what ways did the tanzimat reforms, particularly administrative centralisation, ultimately undermine Ottoman authority?

How did the role of the military change during the latter years of the Ottoman Empire and in what ways did it impact on the political trajectory of the Middle East?

How did economic dependency feed into dynamics of resentment and emulation that shaped emerging political ideologies and rhetoric in the Middle East?

FURTHER READING


An inclusive and detailed overview of three major Muslim empires who were seminal in shaping the relationship between Islam and politics.

Gerber, Haim (2010) *State and Society in the Ottoman Empire*. Farnham: Ashgate. An examination of the interplay between the socioeconomic history of Turkish society, the tanzimat and the development of Turkish and Arab nationalist identities in the late Ottoman Empire.


Focused on broad themes relating to local trends and the interplay with global forces, this volume unpacks the emerging trends in the late Ottoman Empire and its legacies for the modern Middle East.


Through exploring the relationship between various communities and central authority in the Ottoman Empire, this volume provides critical insights into emerging political forces in the Middle East.


A seminal work on the transition from Ottoman to Republican rule in Turkey forming the basis of the modern state of Turkey.
REFERENCES


