Ottomans in Syria: "Turkish Colonialism", or Something Else?[1]

James A. Reilly

ABSTRACTS

Syrien unter der Herrschaft der Osmanen bietet Anlass, das Konzept von Kolonialismus zu hinterfragen. Über vier Jahrhunderte hinweg (1516–1918) herrschte das Osmanische Reich über die vorwiegend arabischsprachige Bevölkerung des syrischen Gebiets. Aufgrund der Ansiedlung neuer Bevölkerungsgruppen, der ökonomischen Ausbeutung durch Beamte und der Ko-optation von „kriegerischen" oder „tribalen" Gemeinschaften in die imperiale Ordnung hat die osmanische Herrschaft in Syrien eine zumindest oberflächliche Ähnlichkeit mit dem modernen Kolonialismus. Allerdings ist die Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches in Syrien komplizierter, als es die binäre Unterscheidung von Kolonisatoren und Kolonialisierten den Anschein erweckt. Denn das Osmanische Sultanat verwandelte sich selbst aus einem mächtigen vormodernen Imperium in einen bedrängten modernen Staat mit defensiver Haltung. Die osmanische Herrschaft in Syrien veranschaulicht weniger einen „türkischen Kolonialismus" als vielmehr den Versuch einer älteren imperialen Herrschaftsordnung, sich den neuen und widrigen Umständen moderner Staatlichkeit anzupassen.

Syria under Ottoman rule offers material for interrogating the concept of colonialism. The Ottoman Empire governed the predominantly Arabic-speaking population of the Syrian lands for four centuries (1516–1918). Ottoman rule in Syria bears at least a superficial resemblance to modern colonialism, including implantation of new populations, economic exploitation by administrators, and co-optation of "warlike" or "tribal" communities into the imperial structure. But the story of the Ottoman Empire in Syria is more complicated than a binary colonizers-colonized vision allows. The Ottoman sultanate transitioned from a powerful pre-modern em-

pire to a beleaguered and defensive-minded modern state. Rather than representing "Turkish colonialism", Ottoman rule in Syria illustrates an instance of how an older imperial structure tried to adapt to new and unfavourable circumstances of modern statehood.

The Ottoman Empire ruled Syria for 400 years (1516–1918). The Ottomans' capital was at Istanbul and their administrative language was Turkish. Arab nationalists writing in the first half of the twentieth century decried 400 years of Ottoman oppression, and compared what they called Turkish rule to the French and British colonial administrations that followed the Ottomans' defeat in the First World War.[2] When Arab states subsequently obtained independence, nationalists hailed this achievement as one in which the Arabs had overcome successive colonialisms – first Turkish, and then its French and British successors.[3]

Conflating Ottoman ("Turkish") rule with French and British colonialism is untenable. Ottoman rule in Syria represented domination of a different kind, hearkening back to older forms of political authority that preceded modern colonialism. Even if ruling elites of the later Ottoman Empire harboured colonial-type ambitions, their state on the eve of the First World War had become a semi-colony and lacked the political or ideological resources to enact colonialist policies.

Colonies are not new, but "colonialism", as a systemic modern phenomenon, is usually dated to 1492 when Christopher Columbus, in the employ of the Spanish crown, made landfall in the West Indies and opened up an era of European overseas conquest and exploitation.[4] Subsequent colonial empires varied widely in terms of their characteristics and rationales, but typically they consisted of lands separate from the home (later, "national") territories of the colonizing powers, governed by administrations whose methods and modes of governance were distinct from those used in the home territories.[5] Colonies were of various types: commercial outposts, strategic points, and territories of colonial settlement.[6] In its mature form (eighteenth century onward), European colonialism was characterized by large disparities in technology between colonizers and colonized, and by colonizers' confidence that they represented a superior culture and/or religion, destined to dominate and to remake the world in their own image.[7]

Colonialism studies acknowledge the difference between older types of empire and the modern phenomenon of colonialism. Older empires, including the Roman, Byzantine,

2   G. Antonius, The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement, Philadelphia 1939, p. 276.
3   A non-scholarly critique of the ubiquity of the phrase "Turkish colonialism" – al-isti'mar al-turki in Arabic – is at https://mar7aba.com.tr/الاستعمار-التركي-مصطلح-تم-تسويقه-للإ/ (accessed 6 June 2019).
4   N. MacQueen, Colonialism, Harlow 2007, p. xvii; J. Osterhammel, Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview, S. Frisch (trans.), 2nd edn, Princeton 2005, pp. 3–4.
5   MacQueen, Colonialism, p. 2; R. Tignor, Foreword, in: Osterhammel, Colonialism, p. x; Osterhammel, Colonialism, p. 9.
6   MacQueen, Colonialism, pp. 5, 13; Osterhammel, Colonialism, pp. 10–12; W. Reinhard, A Short History of Colonialism, K. Sturge (trans.), Manchester 2011, p. 1; Tignor, Foreword, p. ix.
7   MacQueen, Colonialism, p. 21; Osterhammel, Colonialism, pp. 15–16; Reinhard, Short History, p. 1.

Mughal, and Ottoman, sought to consolidate resources and to impose the dominion of a ruling class, group or stratum on subject populations. Typically, these older empires were territorially contiguous, or linked by bodies of water (such as the Mediterranean and Black Seas) that did not require ocean-going knowledge and technologies to traverse. Older empires' superior resources, organization, and tactics accounted for their military successes, but in lieu of a lopsided difference in technologies available to rulers and the ruled, subject populations might challenge their overlords given fortuitous circumstances and leadership. (An example from ancient Syria is illustrated by Zenobia, a queen of Palmyra who broke free of Roman vassalage and governed Syria in her own name for a brief period in the third century CE.) The older empires incorporated freshly conquered regions as provinces or comparable administrative units.[8]

Rulers of the older empires might compel populations to move from one region and settle in another to serve the rulers' interests. For instance, the early modern Ottoman Empire depended on mobile populations to bolster the sultanate's authority and defend its expanding frontiers.[9] In the early seventeenth century Shah Abbas of Safavid Iran compelled Armenians of Julfa (in Azerbaijan, where Armenians dominated the silk trade with Ottoman Aleppo) to move to a newly established Armenian quarter in the Safavids' capital Isfahan.[10] But these old empires did not practice colonialism in the modern sense. Ottoman practice in Syria illustrates this contention.[11] Unless otherwise noted, the word "Syria" is shorthand for "the lands of Syria", a designation that encompassed much of the western Fertile Crescent and is roughly equivalent to the historic Arabic toponym Bilad al-Sham, "the lands of Damascus". The boundaries of Bilad al-Sham were cultural, not administrative. They extended from Gaza in the south to Antioch and Aleppo in the north, encompassing the Mediterranean coastal regions in between and tapering off in the east where dry-farming steppes met the desert. The predominant language of Ottoman Syria's population was Arabic. During the country's 400 years of Ottoman rule, formal administrative divisions always included provincial capitals in Damascus and Aleppo. Mediterranean coastal areas were usually assigned to provinces based ephemerally in port towns: Tripoli, Sidon, Acre and finally Beirut. As for Jerusalem, from the 1870s onward it became the centre of a separate administrative unit, and a kind of forerunner for twentieth-century Palestine including the coast from Gaza to Jaffa. But as the translated Arabic phrase "lands of Damascus" suggests, that abundantly watered city located in a lush oasis was at the centre of the cultural and geographic understanding of Bilad al-Sham, even though the province of Damascus (in 1865 renamed Syria) administered only a part of these lands.

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8   Osterhammel, Colonialism, p. 9.

9   R. Kasaba, A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants and Refugees, Seattle 2009, chap. 2, passim.

10   B. Masters, The Origins of Western Economic Dominance in the Middle East: Mercantilism and the Islamic Economy in Aleppo, 1600–1750, New York 1988, pp. 82–83.

11   Historical material on Ottoman Syria is taken from J. A. Reilly, Fragile Nation, Shattered Land: The Modern History of Syria, London 2019.

The Ottomans integrated the various Syrian provinces into the empire's administration. These provinces evolved in tandem with administrative changes in the wider empire. The Syrian lands were not governed separately or differently from the core regions of the empire (centred on Istanbul and its Balkan and Anatolian hinterlands). In the beginning, the Ottoman ruling elite were a distinct social caste – "official" Ottomans, males endowed with military status and rank, in a formal (and honorific) sense deemed to be slaves of the Sultan, and of various ethnic backgrounds; but all were versed in the Empire's administrative language, Ottoman Turkish. Few Syrians or Arabs numbered among them. But on the other hand, ranking Muslim legal and judicial figures drawn from local populations also exercised authority and complemented the official Ottomans. As for Christians and Jews, the sultanate recognized their clerics and gave them authority over their respective communities. Nevertheless, throughout the empire's cities sharia (Islamic law) courts served the general population as everyday adjudicators of civil law including property transactions, credit and debt, and morals disputes.

Muslim legal authorities – known as the *ulama*, "those with knowledge" – were men who hailed from respected local families and local colleges (*madrasas*). Their incorporation into the Ottomans' administration was a logical outcome of the ulama's training in Islamic law and jurisprudence. The ulama were linchpins of Ottoman rule in urban centres like Damascus and Aleppo. Although greedy or oppressive officials and corrupt ulama were part of Syria's social landscape, in the public mind their failings attached to individuals, not to the whole body of officialdom or *ulama*. Local *ulama* in service to the Ottoman sultanate did not face derision from their urban confreres as "collaborators" in league with alien rulers. On the contrary, the *ulama*'s service to the sultanate burnished their credentials and enhanced their local influence. The sultanate's deference to, and dependence on, *ulama* turned the latter into de facto tribunes or spokesmen for local concerns and interests, even as Ottoman rule allowed many of them to accumulate huge fortunes.

Although the top judge in each Syrian province usually was a non-Arab (typically a Turkish speaker from the core Ottoman lands, referred to locally as a Rumi), the bulk of everyday legal matters was put in the hands of local Arabophone *ulama*.[12] They were the deputy judges, muftis (jurisconsults) and teachers who formed the consciousness of educated Muslims, and they numbered among the local notables whom the Ottomans cultivated. The most prominent Syrian *ulama* belonged to prestigious families whose claim to notability preceded the Ottoman conquest, or had been established independently of imperial patronage. *Ulama* dynasties served the sultanate and benefitted from association with it, but they were not creatures of the Ottomans to the same degree as were dynastic military families.

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12   Rumi = Roman, since the Ottomans governed from Constantinople (Istanbul), the erstwhile seat of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire. The word "Rum" also was attached to Orthodox Christians, whose preeminent clerical figure was the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople.

The rise of dynastic military families was another feature of Ottoman rule, or had become so by the eighteenth century. Over time, households of Ottoman officials sent to Syria and other Arab provinces put down local roots, adopted Arabic, and became "local Ottomans". They were a kind of nobility of service, raised to authority on account of their utility to the ruling dynasty. The most fortunate of them, with the right combination of skill and imperial patronage, retained influence over many generations. Their continued loyalty to and dependence on the sultanate did not diminish the standing of local Ottomans, who came to be seen as a natural or normal part of the Syrian scene, as representatives of particular regional (as well as family) interests. The most famous Syrians in this category were the Azms, whose progeny frequently served as governors of Damascus for nearly a century from 1725 to 1807, and who continued thereafter to play significant roles in the province of Damascus (as aforementioned, renamed Syria in 1865). Like other local Ottoman-era military families, Azms' political fortunes survived the empire's collapse and some of them went on to hold positions in post-First World War Syria. The last Azm to hold high office in independent Syria was prime minister Khalid al-Azm, overthrown in the 1963 coup that brought the Baath party to power.

The Azms were likely of Arab origin, but many other military families who came to wield local and regional authority across many generations were of Kurdish background, including the Yusufs of Damascus and the Barazis of Hama. Kurds' salience in this role derived from their role as commanders or *aghas*, capable of mustering and commanding both regular and irregular troops, their authority reinforced by ties of community and kinship. In time, as Kurdish-origin military families settled in the major cities and participated in the Ottomans' patronage system, they became Arabized.

Below the level of political elites, other non-Arabs and non-Syrians who settled in the country's major urban centres also became Arabized and localized over time. The eclectic origins of Syria's urban populations were taken for granted. Newcomers' integration was facilitated by Ottoman-era institutions such as craft guilds, urban quarters and religious communities (in particular, for Muslims, the Sufi brotherhoods). Consciousness of class, ethnicity, clan and tribal affiliation was very much part of the social mix in both urban and rural Syria, but the dichotomy between "colonizers" and "colonized" that was (or became) a defining feature of modern colonialism was not part of the theory or practice of Ottoman imperial rule.

This was true even in cases where specific communities were transplanted to Syrian lands by government edict, usually to serve as "enforcers" in restive or tribally dominated rural areas. Two instances of such transplantations are Turcoman settlements established near Hama in the sixteenth century, and Circassian resettlement on Syria's steppe plains in the nineteenth century. Turcomans were expected to secure trade routes against Bedouin raids and to form a loyal bulwark against rural banditry. Circassian resettlement three centuries later was Istanbul's way of addressing the problem of imperial Russia's dispossession of a Muslim population from the north-eastern shores of the Black Sea. The Ottomans founded Circassian communities to establish year-round administrations in Syrian frontier areas that had been under Bedouin tribal influence. Turcomans and

Circassians retained distinct ethnic markers (language, ethnic nomenclature, dress), but they were not colonizers equivalent to the white settlers in European colonies. They became part of Syria's population mix, and were not a self-perpetuating caste who exercised authority over the natives.

From the standpoint of Syrian urban opinion, Ottoman rule was normative. Although the Ottoman conquest of Syria in 1516–1517 defeated the Egypt-based Mamluk dynasty, Ottoman rule did not destroy a local ruling group or disempower the local ulama – to the contrary. As political pragmatists the Ottoman rulers ratified extant power relations in the country, and solicited the favour and goodwill of the ulama. The first major Ottoman monument built in Damascus was the conquering Sultan Selim I's shrine to the thirteenth-century Damascene mystic and theosophist Ibn Arabi. The next major public monument, built by Selim's successor Suleiman "the Magnificent", was a complex for housing pilgrims to Mecca as they travelled the imperial road from Anatolia to the Hejaz holy cities. Constructions like these aimed to bolster the sultanate's claims to authority based on its respect for Islamic norms and the ideal of "justice" embodied in the concept of sharia. Political power brokers in and around Syria's cities, and the Muslim scholars who dominated the country's literary life, viewed the sultanate's authority as legitimate and jostled to earn positions within it.[13]

Even widespread rural rebellions in northern Syria during the seventeenth century, known as the Jelali (Celali) revolts, were not anti-sultanate in an ideological sense. A principal figure in the disturbances, a Kurdish military leader in the region of Aleppo named Ali Pasha Janbulad, wanted Istanbul's acknowledgment of his family's position. During a pause in hostilities he accepted the Ottomans' offer to become governor of Aleppo. Other rural strongmen of this era – for instance Fakhr al-Din II Maan, who centuries later was repackaged and marketed as a Lebanese proto-nationalist – strove to become recognized members of Istanbul's tax-farming hierarchy.

In some places and among some communities there were indeed ideological elements of opposition to the Ottoman sultanate, where communities and their leaderships rejected the sultanate's claims of legitimacy. For these communities the Ottomans and their local allies were intrusive and hostile outsiders. This hostility and alienation reflected a rural-urban division, where country people experienced Ottoman city-based authority as alien, grasping, brutal and oppressive. The sultan and his servants, including the sultanate's local and regional allies, were seen through the lens of *zulm*, oppression, making their rule fundamentally unjust and illegitimate. These hostile attitudes are mostly discerned from behaviours, since targeted populations rarely left written records of their own. Mountain peasant communities acknowledged the authority of their local sheikhs, who vied with rivals for the sultanate's recognition (for instance, the Mount Lebanon strongman Fakhr al-Din II cited earlier). But rural mountain communities on the losing side of such struggles were exposed to the depredations of sultanate-sanctioned officials.

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13   Cf. Reinhard's argument that colonialism is marked by a sense of "alterity" between rulers and ruled, between outsiders as opposed to natives (Reinhard, Short History, p. 1).

For instance, in the early nineteenth century mountain peasants in the hills east of Tartus and Jabla (who were Alawites, members of a dissenting Muslim religious community) underwent repeated ordeals of violence and murder at the hands of Tripoli-based Janissaries (Ottoman infantry) who made them targets of attacks, raids and beheadings done in the sultan's name. And whilst the leading Shiite Muslim military families in Mount Lebanon and the Beqaa Valley manoeuvred within the Ottomans' patronage system, the dense Shiite peasant populations further south in Jabal Amil (between Mount Lebanon and the hills of Galilee) looked to their own quasi-independent sheikhs for legitimate leadership. In the case of these Shiite populations, we have a unique written record from a literate farmer and his son in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They compared the Ottoman pashas to pharaoh, who in the Quran is an unjust, oppressive and illegitimate ruler. Finally, although pastoral nomads (Bedouins) were symbolically incorporated into the sultanate's rule through Istanbul's recognition of a "Commander of the Steppe" responsible for ensuring safe passage of pilgrims and trade, other pastoral nomads challenged symbols of Ottoman power and did not fear to attack and devastate officially escorted caravans (as famously happened in 1757).

So Ottoman rule in Syria did not meet the criteria of modern colonialism. Broad swathes of urban society accepted the sultanate as legitimate, including ulama whose writings are the principal sources we have for the Muslim majority's worldview. Acceptance of the Ottomans' claims to legitimacy extended to urbanites' rural allies, who sought official support and recognition for their roles as tax farmers and rural intermediaries. However, the sultanate's assertions of legitimacy were more tenuous in rural areas and carried no weight at all in some places and among some communities. These negative memories and sentiments of disaffection supplied material for anti-Ottoman and anti-Turkish narratives in the nationalist era. But hostile twentieth-century voices were raised in opposition to an empire that had not, in the main, adopted modern colonialist discourse and practice.

Even though modern colonialism generally featured territories separate from the ruling or national core, this generalisation alone cannot peremptorily rule out a colonial relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Syria. By way of example, the overland expansion of Russia had become a colonial undertaking by the eighteenth century.[14] A discussion of the Ottomans in Syria needs to consider how their governance of contiguous overland territories compared and contrasted with Russia's.

Moscow's domains constituted an empire that expanded overland and annexed contiguous territories, extending eventually the Pacific Ocean and jumping the Bering Strait to Alaska. Historians generally consider Russia to have turned into a colonial state (no longer "just" an empire) in the eighteenth century. Muscovy had emerged from the political system left by the invading Mongols, as a Christian tributary to the Muslim Golden Horde and their Chingizid successors. (The last of these were the Tatars of the Crimean

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14   M. Khodarkovsky, Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500–1800, Bloomington 2002, pp. 2–4, 184–187.

Khanate.) Although Ivan the Terrible proclaimed himself "emperor" (tsar) in 1547, and official Russia began to fashion a self-understanding as the imperial successor to Rome and Constantinople, the Crimean Tatars held onto an older political memory of Russia as a supplicant polity, and Moscow engaged in the politics of the steppe frontier as one among many political actors jousting for supremacy, wooing allies and signing agreements that were still called (as a legacy of the old Golden Horde political arrangements) *shert'* (from Arabic *shart*).[15] However, by the early eighteenth century Russia's elites began to understand their state not just as another empire, but as a Christian European empire entrusted with a mission to bring Christianity and civilisation to peoples who had neither. Religious identity (Islam, Christianity, animism) had long been among the political and social markers in politics of the steppe, but now it became (in Russian hands) the difference between civilisation and backwardness, a sign of „European-ness" and of Russia's version of what (in the Anglosphere) later would be dubbed the "white man's burden" to uplift backward races.[16]

This transformation in official Russian attitudes went hand in hand with dramatic improvements in Russian capabilities. The Russian government established the fortress, later town, of Orenburg as an outpost of colonial expansion in 1734. Contemporaries hailed as a "gate to the East" and compared Orenburg's establishment to the Spanish exploration or discovery of America.[17] To defend themselves against their erstwhile Muscovite vassal, the once-powerful Crimean Tatars had to rely more and more on the Ottomans, who nonetheless after a disastrous war surrendered Crimea to Russia in 1774. Imperial Russia's colonialist era had well and truly begun. Its behaviour in the steppes marked a sharp contrast to the more traditional frontier politics followed by the Ottomans and their Persian/Iranian counterparts. According to historian Michael Khodarkovsky, Russia's success was due „[…] to Western methods of colonization. Unlike the Persians who were content to launch occasional punitive campaigns to compel their putative subjects to submit tribute, or the Ottomans, who only sporadically fortified their frontiers and brought in occasional settlers, the Russian government proceeded in a systematic fashion to incorporate the new territories and peoples into the empire's military, political, economic and administrative system."[18]

No comparable (colonialist) transformation occurred in the Ottoman Empire's relationship to the Syrian lands. In the nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire itself was becoming a semi-colony: imperial in form but subject to European restrictions in practice. After 1881, European creditors controlled a significant chunk of the Ottoman budget through the Ottoman Public Debt Administration.[19] European protégés and citizens were immune to Ottoman laws. Some parts of the empire, though nominally under Ottoman rule, were administered in fact by one or another of the European powers

15   Ibid., pp. 55–56, 91; personal correspondence from Victor Ostapchuk, 5 July 2019.
16   Khodarkovsky, Russia's Steppe Frontier, pp. 2–3, 176, 184–189, 225.
17   Ibid., pp. 156–161.
18   Ibid., p. 225.
19   E. Zürcher, Turkey: A Modern History, London 1994, pp. 88–89.

(Bosnia-Herzegovina, Egypt, Cyprus) or by local authorities who were clients of European powers (Bulgaria). European oversight restricted Ottoman sovereignty in Mount Lebanon (1861) and was set to do the same in Eastern Anatolia (Armenia) in 1914.[20] Europeans built and owned most of the modern infrastructure in the Ottoman lands, including Syria, such as ports, railways, and utilities. The promise of oil in Ottoman Iraq led to the formation of the European-controlled Turkish Petroleum Company, which was reorganized after the First World War as the British-dominated Iraq Petroleum Company.[21] The Ottoman Empire, its lands and its resources had become targets of European colonialist expansion.[22]

Ottoman elites in the nineteenth century wished for their state to be treated as a peer by the European Great Powers. Reform-minded Ottoman officials pushed through a series of legal and administrative changes designed to turn the sultanate into a modern state, with aspirations of becoming part of the post-Vienna Concert of Europe.[23] These reform measures culminated in the promulgation of an Ottoman constitution in 1876, which established an elected parliament and designated Ottoman Turkish as the language of parliamentary business. The nineteenth-century reforms did in fact create a modern state (and a military) that endured through the First World War, and whose cadres went on to form the Turkish Republic in 1923. During the last Ottoman decades, Ottoman Turkish elites adopted attitudes that overlapped with those associated with colonialism. For instance, the old empire did not much care what subject populations thought, as long as they fulfilled their fiscal obligations and acquiesced to the sultanate's authority. The later Ottoman state, in contrast, sought to create a sense of active loyalty to the homeland and the government, to spread modern education and literacy, and to cultivate pro-regime consciousness among the general population.[24]

These are not necessarily characteristics of colonialism but of nation-building, and in the twentieth century they became a universal set of expectations among postcolonial nation-builders in the Middle East and elsewhere. But in the late-Ottoman context, reformist elites had a sense that they were hobbled by the "backwardness" of their populations, especially (but not only) Arabic-speakers in mountainous or rural regions.[25] As enlightened elites (Arabic *mutanawwarin*), Ottoman administrators and educators adopted their version of the "white man's burden", namely, a self-appointed mission to raise the cultural level of backward populations. For "enlightened" Ottoman elites this was particularly true of nominal or heterodox Muslim communities who needed to be taught the "correct", Ottoman version of Islam which, among other things, emphasized

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20 Ibid., p. 120.
21 P. Sluglett, Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country, New York 2007, pp. 67–75.
22 Reinhard, Short History, pp. 226–230.
23 S. Deringil, The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire 1876–1909, London 1998, p. 136.
24 State-run education in the late Ottoman Empire is the subject of B. Fortna, Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire, Oxford 2002.
25 U. Makdisi, Ottoman Orientalism, in: American Historical Review 107 (2002) 3, pp. 770–771.

loyalty to the sultan as the supposed caliph of Sunni Muslims around the world. The opening of the Imperial Museum in 1869 was part and parcel of the sultanate's efforts to represent civilisation, progress and science in the nineteenth-century world, challenging European monopoly claims to this cultural capital, and asserting Istanbul's position at the civilisational apex of the Ottoman lands.[26] As part of its quest to be accepted as a peer Great Power in the era of colonialism, the Ottoman government participated in the Berlin Conference of 1884 which partitioned Africa among the colonial powers. Ottoman statesmen went so far as to identify with Europeans' "civilizing missions" in Africa, comparing them to Istanbul's duty to "spread the 'light of Islam' into 'savage' regions".[27] There are parallels here with the colonialist Russian attitude toward the "backward" and non-Christian segments of Central Asian populations who, it was claimed, needed the civilizing mission of Russia and the Orthodox church delivered through the expansion of Russian power and the colonial transformation of incorporated societies. But taken as a whole, Ottoman efforts have more in common with post-colonial nation-builders who sought (often against heavy odds) to create nation-states out of countries that were anything but.[28] Aspiring postcolonial national leaderships might well pursue policies that amount to "internal colonialism" (and the Turkish Republic's treatment of its Kurdish populations has been characterized as such), but the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ottomans' goal was not to turn the general population into "Turks".[29] Rather, it was to strengthen and favour the empire's Muslim majority to make them bulwarks of the Ottoman state against Christian subjects/citizens (especially ethnic Greeks and Armenians) whose loyalty they doubted. In this respect, and in this era, the Istanbul government treated Syrians well and cultivated their loyalties, offering local families and power brokers integration into Ottoman institutions and state practices. It would be as if Great Britain had sought to extend citizenship, voting rights and parliamentary representation to the populations of India, or France to the entire population of Algeria (not just to Algeria's Christians and Jews).

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed and Arab nationalists in Syria worked to build a post-Ottoman future, they defined their aspirational Syria against the Ottoman past. This was an ideological project that obscured the inconvenient fact that most Arab administrators and military officers from Syria had continued to serve the empire until its final defeat, whether they were providing their services out of conviction or pragmatism. In the post-1918 world, nationhood and national self-determination became the cur-

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26   Ibid., pp. 783–784.
27   Deringil, Well-Protected Domains, p. 148.
28   This was not just a post-colonial phenomenon. Prior to the First World War, advocates of centralisation and cultural homogenisation in France used the colonialist trope of a "civilizing mission" to refer to areas of the country that were not yet fully integrated into national life (E. Weber, Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France 1870–1914, Stanford 1976, chap. 29).
29   Reinhard, Short History, pp. 1–2; Kendal, Kurdistan in Turkey, in: G. Chaliand (ed.), A People Without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan, 2nd edn, New York 1993, pp. 72–73.

rency of political legitimacy (or of claims to legitimacy) and Arab Syrians did not want to be left behind.

Unfortunately for nationalists' aspirations, the victorious French and British had other plans. France created a Syrian state (or a multiplicity of Syrian states, for a while) but Paris worked assiduously to discourage the creation of a Syrian nation. When nationalists finally did achieve full independence for Syria in 1946, it was less because of their innate strength than it was on account of French weakness, including Britain's insistence (during the Second World War) that Charles De Gaulle's Free French administration should promise independence to Syria and Lebanon. In national histories the Ottoman past receded into a kind of caricature, or a foil against which to demonstrate the virtues and struggles of the oppressed Syrian and Arab nation.

The Ottomans were not altruists. They were after all builders and rulers of an empire, and during the First World War the Ottoman Turkish leadership implemented a genocidal "final solution" to the empire's Armenian national question. But whatever else Ottoman rule in Syria may have represented, it was not colonialism but an example of an older empire that ultimately could not stand up to the new forces of nationalism, industrialisation and expansionist European imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.