

Before the Arab Spring

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Review of *THE FALL OF THE OTTOMANS: The Great War in the Middle East*, by Eugene Rogan and *A LAND OF ACHING HEARTS: The Middle East in the Great War*, by Leila Tarazi Fawaz

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The hundred years since the outbreak of World War I have made that cataclysmic conflict seem more relevant than ever. Not only did it anticipate a now-common view of an irrational world subject to terror and violence, but it also prefigured a time when states could more easily make war than secure the peace. Several scholars have now retold the story of that war partly to explain how and why a system of alliances that worked for so many decades failed to stop the world from stumbling into a prolonged spiral of violence and devastation.

The century that has passed since the first shots were fired in a war whose horrors could not be imagined at its outset has called attention to a calamity now cast as the murderous side of modernity. Because a war is understood partly by what happens in its aftermath, it often incorporates a matrix of cause-and-effect actions that reflect as much about the era in which they are formulated as about the tragedy they explain. Timing requires consideration. Marking the beginning of this catastrophe after a hundred years gives the impression that when such crises are viewed from start to finish, the mistakes that locked so many into conflict and misery can be uncovered and ultimately averted the next time they emerge. The advent of a century tends to provoke that kind of reflection because the accounting system we have invented measures time in the hope of rendering its durations manageable and the events they frame lucid. Multiples of ten--decades,

centuries, millennia--are intended to represent boundaries that when crossed instill either a sense of progress or an awareness of decline. Thus what was once thought to comprise too many disparate aims and interests to be comprehensible can be fit together if scrutinized from the kind of perspective that can only come from the passage of time.

Because the many insights gained from recent studies about the causes and consequences of this global disaster have focused attention on Europe, it has been difficult to see how deeply rooted its origins were in other parts of the globe, most notably in the Middle East. For if one were to identify a time and a place for the birth of the troubles brewed in these Arab and Muslim lands, it would be this so-called Great War of 1914-1918. That war is commonly taken as a starting point for the region's descent into chaos and disorder, unleashing forces that still restrict freedom and opportunity and continue to grind down hope. A war that wreaked havoc in the Middle East in the last century casts a shadow over everything said and done in this new one.

Convinced there are lessons to be learned, two historians have recently examined the Great War in the Middle East in order to offer a reckoning of a conflict that left an indelible imprint on the region's politics and society. Written by specialists in the history of the Middle East, it would be difficult to overstate their achievements. They have combed archives and libraries in search of any written memos or letters that might explain why the war was fought and how it was experienced by the men and women mobilized for combat and by those left behind to starve in the ravaged cities and villages denied provisions. By documenting the military strategies and tactics of Ottoman rulers, Eugene Rogan has, in effect, built a memorial to those who gave their lives in service to imperial interests and to the Empire's sacred status. Leila Tarazi Fawaz writes about the appalling losses suffered by the Empire's ordinary subjects, so many of whom marched to

war with courage and resignation but generally possessed of no common purpose except to return to family and home. A war intended to end all wars brought the region in the words of David Fromkin's popular study to '[a peace to end all peace](#)' reinforcing a conventional explanation for why violence has persisted in these lands whose borders were bent to the service of European interests.. But while both books can be read as parables for today's Middle East, neither pushes the notion of historical parallel to the point of inevitability: for this war was man-made and not a natural disaster.

Eugene Rogan and Leila Tarazi Fawaz are as qualified as anyone alive today to write these studies. Both have spent decades working as historians--the former teaching at Oxford and the latter at Tufts. Both have published books that enable scholars and the general public to understand the history of the Middle East with greater depth. Both write as vividly and knowledgeably about political developments as about land tenure. Both bring ordinary men and women as well as military and political leaders to life. They show how dedication to scholarship can nourish the powers of the imagination and produce lessons for our times.

Much of the compelling force of the analyses of Rogan and Fawaz is suggested in the titles of their books. *The Fall of The Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East* is defined by Rogan as the event toward which the Great War led and the reason for the fervent fight waged by Turkish political and military leaders straining to hold back a military and political tide turning against this empire. For Ottoman rulers, this was a patriotic war and well worth the misery and suffering it visited upon the population. When surrender convinced Ottoman rulers to sign a treaty that would have dismembered the Turkish heartland, the military continued its combat operations until it secured international recognition for the borders it deemed minimally acceptable. But if the Great

War signaled an existential danger for Ottoman rulers, it transmitted a much more ambiguous message to the Empire's Arab subjects, according to Fawaz who tellingly calls her study *A Land of Aching Hearts: The Middle East in the Great War*. Arabs conscripted into military service fought bravely but many without enthusiasm, convinced that "the rich [including Ottoman officials] not only weathered the war but also profited from it". [121]

For most people in the Middle East, the Great War that killed so many and fragmented their societies belonged to someone else: it was either a foreign conflict entangled in European political rivalries and transported to their shores or the outcome of policies pursued by a misguided Young Turk leadership, too eager for a fight and too indifferent to its human costs. Rogan begins his study this way:

Though nearly every modern Arab state was drawn into the Great War in one way or another, the conflict is remembered as someone else's war--a time of suffering inflicted on the Arab people by the failing Ottoman Empire and its rash Young Turk leadership. In the Arab world, the Great War left martyrs (especially Arab activists hanged in central squares of Beirut and Damascus that were subsequently renamed "Martyrs' Square" in both cities) but no heroes. [xvi-xvii]

But even while regarding this war as having been imported from other capitals and other continents, Ottoman subjects were drawn into its actions. From the start, both sides insisted their cause was just and invested with religious sanctity. Ottoman leaders proclaimed their battles a holy war--*jihad*--trying to make it harder for Muslims to fight for the British and French and to bring their fundamental differences with their enemies into sharper relief.

Just as the British feared that waging war against a Moslem Empire would provoke calls for *jihad* across their own imperial lands, so the Germans calibrated their alliance with the Ottomans not simply in terms of military might but also as harnessing Islam's well known ideas about waging war. Still, this was no simple clash of

civilizations. Muslims could not ignore the fact that the Ottomans, too, fought as part of an alliance with Christian countries and had also incorporated their weapons, officers, and codes of conduct in their frontline battalions. Rogan's emphatic conclusion that the very limited responses to the repeated calls for *jihad* anticipate trends today is corroborated by Fawaz's assessment that while religion may have raised public consciousness about the duty to answer a call to arms, it inspired no energy or drive for a holy war.

One of the central lessons from these histories is that the attempt to whip masses into frenzies for xenophobic *jihad* has limited appeal even while Muslims are stigmatized to this day as embracing a culture of death more than an ethos for life. With fevered imaginations on both sides of the conflict, it was sufficient for almost all political and military leaders to hear a few battle cries to Allah to doubt the loyalty of their own Muslim troops. But for the most part, Muslim soldiers followed orders whether fighting for or against their religious brethren conscripted for the other side. Calls to wage *jihad* far outnumber the actual responses to them. No distinction between friend and foe could be drawn in this war along ethnic or religious lines.

Most knew that war damaged bodies and possessions. By 1914, three wars and lost territories had forced millions of Ottoman subjects out of their homes, their villages, and the lands they plowed.

In the course of five years, the Ottoman Empire had endured a revolution, three major wars against foreign powers, and a number of internal disorders ranging from sectarian massacres to separatist revolts--each of which threatened further foreign intervention. It is hard to overstate the magnitude of Ottoman losses during that period. The empire had surrendered the last of its possessions in North Africa and in the Balkans, together with millions of its subjects, to European rule. [27]

But the Empire counted not only casualties and refugees; it also measured its losses in terms of the value it placed on certain regions and resources.

Losing Libya was nothing compared to ceding Albania, Macedonia, and Thrace. Since being conquered from the Byzantine Empire five centuries earlier, these European territories had been the economic and administrative heart of the Ottoman world. They ranked among the most prosperous and developed provinces in the empire. The loss of revenues was compounded by the high costs of the First Balkan War to the Ottoman treasury. Thousands of refugees needed resettlement, and disease swept their squalid camps. The government also faced tremendous expenses to rebuild the Ottoman army after the losses in men and material incurred through two failed wars. [21]

Rogan's narrative eloquence shows how a steady buildup of forces convinced Ottoman leaders that it was necessary to join the war in order to redeem the lands lost in the last several decades. Even before the dust had settled on the ruins of one Balkan War, another erupted, opening the way for the recovery of some lost territory that gave Ottoman rulers something to celebrate and deepened their conviction that military might carry significant economic and social benefits for the homeland. Rogan summarizes these calculations with these words:

Spring brought a new wave of optimism to the Ottoman Empire in 1914. Victory in the Second Balkan War and the recovery of Edirne and Eastern Thrace had done wonders for national confidence. After years of wartime austerity, the Ottoman economy was the first beneficiary of peace. Demobilized soldiers returned to the workforce. Farmers predicted record harvests. A building boom was reported in towns across the Turkish and Arab provinces. Trade resumed with renewed vigour once the sea lanes were cleared of warships and mines. [29]

While this war has been acknowledged as the crucible that forged modern Middle East developments, it has remained remarkably resistant to the kinds of probing analytic inquiries applied to military strategy and wartime experiences in the European combat zones. Eugene Rogan and Leila Tarazi Fawaz have put an end to that resistance with books that capture both the historical and emotional dimensions of a war explaining how

the battles and campaigns waged also provide a record of the human suffering and sorrow.

The story Eugene Rogan tells is sometimes excruciating in its detail of a war whose violence was animated as much by the struggle of poorly provisioned Ottoman soldiers against the forces of nature as against the enemy soldiers arrayed in battle against them. Against disease little could be done but against what were perceived as disloyal populations, there were more lethal measures often deployed--the genocidal policies against Armenians the most notorious. Ethnic cleansing served strategic interests. No wonder the sheer demands of sustaining imperial power often swept away attention to the outcomes--moral or otherwise.

An absolute commitment to re-establish their dominion over lands lost drove Ottoman armies into battle until the war's bitter end. What they could not do over the war's long duration was subjugate an already enfeebled economy to the ever expanding needs of the common defense. Growing numbers of the Empire's subjects felt vulnerable and deeply anxious about how long they could hold out. When the Empire strayed from the disciplined and attainable objective of self-defense, it courted failure. When it activated its troops for attack, it often forfeited its control over a vast swath of the territory it had once ruled. Given the postwar chaos and suffering in every corner of the Ottoman Empire, it is extraordinarily difficult to imagine how any soldiers still possessed the will and energy to carry on with the fight after the formal surrender declaration in 1918. But the division of Ottoman lands promised in the first diplomatic agreement signed by a postwar government awakened a new determination to fight as the Empire's men and women believed they were facing an attempt to dispossess them of their birthright. This time Ottoman troops had a more compelling rationale for continuing

their battles in the Turkish heartlands than their enemies whose numbers were depleted and whose will for combat fundamentally weakened by the long years of war.

According to Rogan, then, the Ottoman Empire literally fell when its sultan and government accepted the terms imposed by the victorious powers at Sevres calling "for the partition of Anatolia and the distribution of territories with Turkish-majority populations among former subject peoples and hostile religions." [385 and 392] The signing of that treaty convinced the Empire's soldiers still on the frontlines to continue their war not for the sake of restoring an old discredited imperial order but rather for the purpose of establishing a new one with a strong nationalist identity.

In signing the Treaty of Sevres on 10 August 1920, the Porte provoked an irreconcilable split with the Turkish Nationalist Movement. From that date forward, the Kemalists worked to bring down both the treaty and the Ottoman government that signed it....They succeeded in July 1923, the nationalist government in Turkey signed a new treaty with the victorious powers in Lausanne, Switzerland that recognized Turkey's independence more or less within its present boundaries. [394-395]

Unlike Eugene Rogan who explains how this war kept faith with the Ottoman past and was arguably worth fighting, Leila Tarazi Fawaz asserts that even most of the war's survivors believed "...all their sacrifices were in vain [because] peace treaties [permitted] the victorious colonial powers [to] divide up the region in ways that ignored natural divisions in favor of artificial borders that still cause resentment or conflict." [277]

The particular campaigns of this Great War cut through the Arab lands and set off dreadful massacres that destroyed not only lives but also the backbone of society. Ordinary people were infuriated by the harsh conscription measures enforced by the Ottoman authorities in order to build the gigantic army needed to withstand the assaults of the newly invented weapons of mass destruction. The manpower problem grew more difficult as increasing numbers of imperial subjects began to suspect they were fighting

for a lost cause. A population frightened and demoralized by the conscription of men taken away from plows and soil had no food to feed the hungry. Confiscations of farm animals destroyed commerce and trapped almost everyone into an outright struggle for survival.

While it was called the Great War, the war actually appeared to Arabs as episodic, a series of assaults by enemies from without whose troops remained in their lands after the Ottoman surrender. After so much destruction and with so many lives lost, a large number of Arabs felt compelled to embrace their own traditions with a new urgency. The war, Fawaz writes, "did not necessarily transform society; at times...[it worked] in favor of a reaffirmation of the values of the old social order...seen by some as preferable to the moral and social wreckage brought on by war." [277-278]

Most Arabs probably considered the Ottoman Empire vital for their welfare but could not necessarily explain why. However attenuated their ties, Arabs experienced the end of the imperial framework as a profound and fundamental loss. Fawaz tries to convey the magnitude of this loss initially with a balance sheet for the casualties:

Establishing precise figures of Ottoman war casualties is quite difficult. Although wartime Ottoman officers kept meticulous records, "much of the widespread deaths from diseases took place in regions, or at times, where and when nobody was available or in a position to count the human toll...For those killed in combat, the total of 325,000 military dead has long been the most commonly used figure. Added to this total, however, must be the 60,000 soldiers, out of a total of 400,000 permanently disabled veterans, who ultimately succumbed to their wounds. Another 400,000 died of disease, while 250,000 more were considered prisoners or missing (this does not account for the estimated 500,000 deserters). [200]

The long devastating war that destroyed this last Muslim Empire also killed off many dreams and plans, and Fawaz pays homage to them by salvaging the stories of ordinary men and women whose lives were cut short or changed forever. And even though the war represented the first public Arab political rupture with imperial rule in the

form of a revolt proclaimed by Sharif Huseyn in June 1916, that vision of Arab power elicits notable restraint from both authors. Rogan observes, that,

On the eve of the Arab Revolt, the Anglo-Hashemite Alliance offered far less than both sides originally believed they were securing on first entering negotiations. The British were not the invincible power they had appeared to be in early 1915, when first setting off to conquer Constantinople.... Yet, the Hashemites were in no position to bargain. All through their correspondence with the high commissioner in Egypt, Sharif Husayn and his sons had presented themselves as leaders of a pan-Arab movement. By May 1916 it was apparent that there would be no broader revolt in Syria and Iraq. The most the sharifs could do was challenge Ottoman rule in the Hijaz. Success depended on their ability to mobilize the notoriously undisciplined Bedouin to their cause. [296-297]

Fawaz, too, tempers her regard for the Arab Revolt because of its origins in the most traditional and tribal parts of the Middle East, a region unable to provide the common ground for a genuinely new political order representing Arab nationalist dreams. Thus, the Arabs who served loyally in the Ottoman army suffered defeat while those wagering on British wartime promises for Arab liberation were betrayed. But perhaps what makes the most enduring claim on public attention is that this war, with its assaults on local society and culture, generated no single unifying vision for the future that could bring together people who were otherwise at each other's throats.

It is true that many Arab intellectuals and political activists turned the Ottoman defeat into a call for Arab unity that would presumably offer restitution for the shattering wartime devastations. But not all Arabs could imagine themselves fitting into this nationalist vision. Many held so fast to religious traditions that they believed only the Muslim community possessed the right and power to correct the wrongs done it by a war fought to serve Western colonial interests. It's easy to see why Muslim activists with their chorus of equality and justice for all came across as more appealing to the poor and less privileged than an Arab nationalism typically embraced by an urban elite. But whatever their disagreements and controversies, all shared a common hostility to colonialism. Thus

while the material wreckage from the war could be cleared away, the social and political wreckage could not be so easily repaired. Far from bringing the region stability and security, the war's end introduced new elements of disorder.

Because the very notion of separate Arab states was a legacy of foreign rule, the borders drawn were interpreted as a means of fragmenting the nation and denying it the possibility for a full and glorious recovery. Even winning formal independence could not bring the Arab World to a state of tranquility or overcome its discomfort with borders intended to delineate where the sovereignty of one country ended and another began. Taking on the functions of a state considered illegitimate had a profound effect on the region's stability and generated more than the customary difficulties in governance. The widely-held belief that the Arab states had been forged out of foreign diplomatic maneuvering and not from the popular will turned anti-colonialism into a sacred imperative that built impediments to making some peace with a global order that could deliver benefits as well as pose dangers. Bound by a commitment to perpetual anti-colonialist resistance--and the tight grip of time past over time present--the people of the Middle East may have now become as much its victims as its adherents.

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