

The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East

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Author: Michael Provence

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Reviewer: Ramazan Hakki Öztan

It was more than 30 years ago when Albert Hourani pointed to the common Ottoman lineages of the Arab political elite active in the inter-war Middle East. ‘They had been at school together in Istanbul’, he noted. Likewise, ‘they had been in the same army or served the same government, they had a common way of looking at the world; behind the vision of Arab unity lay memories of a lost imperial grandeur’.⁽¹⁾ Michael Provence’s recent book is the story of this last Ottoman generation. Part of a wider revisionist push to undo methodological nationalism in the historiography of modern Middle East, Provence’s *The Last Ottoman Generation* challenges the dominance of singular national histories and instead seeks to reconstruct ‘a connected history’ of the inter-war Middle East. In doing so, he offers us not a conventional history of the birth of nations after the demise of the Ottoman Empire, but rather ‘the story of the end of plans, hope, prospects, and horizons’ and how the contemporaries came to terms with the Ottoman collapse (p. 5).

In ways similar to Laila Parsons’ recent biographical study on Fawzi al-Qawuqji, Provence has also chosen life trajectories as the main axis of his historical inquiry and the organizing theme of his book. Instead of focusing on one individual, however, Provence undertakes a study of a generation: the Ottoman military and civilian elites who were born in the 1880s and 1890s, and who received education from a range of prestigious imperial schools that instilled in them a sense of belonging to the empire as well as a commitment to preserve it in the high age of imperialism. In tracing the stories of this generation across time and space, Provence is able to show continuities instead of ruptures in the transition from empire to nation-state and to highlight a common historical trajectory for the post-Ottoman Middle East during the inter-war era. In arguing as such, Provence expands a range of points he had put forth in his oft-cited 2011 *IJMES* article, where he sought to explain the Ottoman origins of insurgencies across the Middle East in the 1920s and 1930s. The overall result here is a well-thought-out analysis of a range of familiar episodes, with added nuance and provocative insights.

Unlike what the nationalist historiographies have come to claim, we now know that Ottoman institutions, elites, and political culture actually survived well beyond the First World War and left behind a fragmented but resilient legacy. Provence tries to capture this reality by imagining ‘a post-Ottoman Middle East of great

cities, and rural and pastoral hinterlands, inter-connected through modern infrastructure, and institutions, undivided by borders, ruling arrangements, or the constructed barriers of human consciousness' (p. 7). He is keen on understanding the effects of mass schooling, particularly imperial military schools which - through tuition-free education and boarding facilities - attracted boys from rural sectors and of modest backgrounds. Educated under the watchful eyes of influential German officers such as Colmar von der Goltz, and infused with his notions of militarized nations, it was this last Ottoman generation that posed as 'the saviour of the Ottoman nation' in a series of wars that wrecked the empire from 1911 to 1918. The first chapter is devoted to a discussion of their education and broader Ottoman military culture, complete with biographies of key individuals whose careers structure the rest of the book. The transitions here from one biographical entry to another can come across a bit disjointed, but the detailed data when combined reveal the shared career trajectories of these imperial functionaries.

The Ottoman defeat in the First World War, however, shattered the visions of imperial reconstruction long cultivated by this last Ottoman generation. The victors of the war, namely Britain and France, had made plans to partition the Ottoman territories, but it proved to be a rather complicated business to reconcile a variety of promises they had made to different parties and reach a post-war settlement. In chapter two, Provence details these negotiations and the imposition of the mandate framework onto the region, showing how the Ottoman educated elite responded by appropriating Lenin and Wilson's language of self-determination to advance their own agendas. As Provence skilfully shows, however, what proved more effective in challenging the dictated terms of the post-war settlement was armed resistance: locally rooted but led by the war-hardened ex-Ottoman officers. In this sense, the successful Kemalist struggle against the partitions in Asia Minor became a source of inspiration for the Ottoman-Arab officers operating in Mesopotamia and Greater Syria (i.e. today's Syria, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, and Jordan). Due to strategic calculations, the Kemalists were also willing to help their former classmates or 'brotherly officers', as Provence calls them, to wage a similar struggle against Britain and France. While both imperial powers struggled greatly to establish control in Greater Syria due to a series of uprisings that featured these itinerant ex-Ottoman veterans, they managed to contain all the insurgencies, except the one led by Mustafa Kemal.

The successful end of the struggle in Anatolia in 1923 led to the renegotiation of the terms of the post-war settlement, which also gave a window of opportunity for all other parties from the region to make another round of claims. Delegation after delegation arrived in Europe, but 'except for those who had won their rights by force of arms, they were to return disappointed' (p. 148). The settlement reached for Turkey meant that France - thus far wary of Kemalist meddling within Syria - became more self-confident in pushing its hold onto Syria, which eventually led to the outbreak of Great Syrian Revolt (1925). This is the topic that Provence must have felt the most at home in covering, since his earlier monograph *The Great Syrian Revolt* (2) tackles it in great detail. Here, Provence provides only a brief but skilful description of the rebellion, then going on to explore the disproportionate counterinsurgency tactics France deployed and the debates these French methods engendered in the League of Nations. The failure of the Syrian revolt in 1927 marked a rapprochement between the last Ottoman generation in Syria and the colonial authorities, whereby the ex-Ottoman civil servants either began to pursue careers in the emerging mandate structures or became influential figures in the emerging nationalist political parties. It was from these platforms, namely by working 'within the system' that they would continue to negotiate a path to independence and cultivate a reformist vision for the future.

Yasin al-Hashimi's premiership in Iraq during the mid-1930s provided both the model and at times funding for nationalist movements from Syria to Palestine. As one of the most charismatic figures of the last Ottoman generation, al-Hashimi maintained important personal networks and embodied political shrewdness, which made his pursuit of real independence and his advocacy for pan-Arabism a real danger in the eyes of the colonial authorities. His tenure was cut short in late October 1936 when he was ousted in a successful coup. Here Provence suggests and goes on to demonstrate for the first time that British complicity remains strong in staging 'the first coup in the modern history of the Arab world' (p. 244). In January 1937, only few months after his fall from power, al-Hashimi passed away in Beirut where he had been spending his last few months in exile. His funeral and the symbolism of the procession through Damascus once again

highlighted the clear linkages to the Ottoman past instead of the national present. Just like al-Hashimi, many historical figures in Provence's last Ottoman generation would not make it beyond the outbreak of the Second World War, falling either victim to assassinations or the troubles of old age, right at a time when the post-First World War settlement and the League of Nations was itself unravelling beyond repair. The book ends with a poignant anecdote that highlights how external meddling continues to shape the politics in modern Middle East today.

Despite its historiographical novelty and lucid prose, a few further lines of inquiry would have enriched this work. First, Provence's *Last Ottoman Generation* is decidedly an Arab generation. Certainly, it is a feat in and of itself to illustrate the Ottoman backgrounds of the Arab 'nationalist' elites who played key roles in the making of the modern Middle East. Yet, in a book that set out to challenge the very parameters of nation-centered narratives, the lack of engagement with the Ottoman backgrounds of the Turkish and Jewish elite is equally problematic. Though its centrality in the making of the post-Ottoman order in the region is made clear by Provence, the Kemalist struggle in Anatolia, for example, remains in the background throughout the book. Provence only refers to the Kemalist movement in-so-far as Ottoman Arab officers saw it as a model in their own struggle against the British and French mandates. Did not Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Şemsettin Sâmî attend the same schools as the Ottoman Arab officers? Would not the inclusion of their biographic data have only made Provence's argument stronger? Similarly, what about David Ben Gurion, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, and Moshe Sharett who also received education in Ottoman schools in Istanbul? Furthermore, in a study whose aim is to deconstruct nation-state histories, it would have been valuable to extend the focus beyond established nation-state boundaries rather than to exclude from the narrative, say, the Ottoman Kurdish and Armenian elite.

Provence convincingly demonstrates that the last Ottoman generation played crucial roles as itinerant revolutionaries from one insurgency to the next throughout the inter-war Middle East. While this is a major contribution, a discussion of the revolutionary culture of the late Ottoman elite is curiously absent in the book, especially given Provence's argument about the centrality of violence to the political outcome of the insurgencies. After all, the last Ottoman generation not only knew one another from Ottoman schools but they also socialized in revolutionary societies where they built ties of trust and cultivated a revolutionary vision for the Ottoman Empire. To be fair, Provence notes in passing that most of these individuals were members of secret revolutionary societies such as the Young Turks and al-Ahd. Yet, to what extent did the last Ottoman generation share a common revolutionary political culture, a shared way of conducting politics, and waging warfare - indeed, a radicalized worldview that supplemented their struggles of 'saving the state'? A more sustained engagement with this revolutionary tradition could have revealed biographical trajectories that could connect Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia with the Levant and Mesopotamia.

Exploring the revolutionary connections, or lack thereof, could have been fruitful and enriching on a different level, too, as it could have shown us the extent to which the last Ottoman generation actually communicated and coordinated with one another in their post-Ottoman odyssey. As it stands, once we move beyond the early 1920s, the connections between these disparate individuals seem to get lost in Provence's narrative, and the late Ottoman elite begin to appear in later years more as figures within their respective national spaces. The organization of the book follows the same trend, as the second half strikes the reader as rather nation-centric, with each section corresponding to Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Transjordan. While some of the figures Provence pursues certainly cut across these mandate boundaries, the way the book is structured still seems to reproduce some of the conventions that the author set out to challenge in the first place. Perhaps, though, this was the inevitable route for the last Ottoman generation - that despite their imperial upbringing and ideals, they had to fit into the nation, however reluctant they may have been to do so.

Finally, even though the book makes occasional references to the petitioners to the League of Nations, Provence's *Last Ottoman Generation* is decidedly focused on the elite (and only men at that). This point is less a criticism than a call for further study, since one cannot expect a book to cover everything. Provence's book inspires us to think about how we might write a more bottom-up history of the last Ottoman

generation, one that could include merchants, peasants, and townspeople - a more 'ordinary' generation of Ottomans. How did they forego their imperial practices and attachments, and come to terms with, and transition to, a national/colonial present? Where did they challenge it and when did they succumb to it?

Provence's *Last Ottoman Generation* is a solid work of scholarship, with an exemplary reinterpretation of the history of inter-war Middle East. Unfortunately, the book came out at a time that did not allow it to draw from more recent research. For a fuller view of the period, Provence's work should be read side by side with Amit Bein's study of Turkey in the interwar era, Benjamin Fortna's biography of Eref the Circassian, and Alp Yenen's work on the Young Turks after 1918, all of which extend the scope of the Ottoman generation beyond its Arab members. Within the framework he sets out for himself, however, Provence is ultimately successful in challenging nationalist teleologies by illustrating the complexities of national origins, while raising important historiographical questions that will hopefully provoke some serious discussions well beyond the confines of the field of modern Middle Eastern Studies.

Notes

1. Albert Hourani, 'The Ottoman Background of the Modern Middle East', in *Emergence of the Modern Middle East* (Berkeley, CA, 1981), pp.1-18, p. 18.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin, TX, 2005).
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