

Introduction

EMPIRE-TO-NATION TRANSITION AND HISTORICAL REPRESENTATIONS

THE DISSOLUTION OF EMPIRES and their replacement by political formations recognized as nation-states is the paramount transformation of the modern history of the world. The chronological determination of an empire's end appears straightforward in retrospect, especially if an event with far-reaching repercussions, such as a revolution, military occupation, or defeat in war, is deemed to have marked its exit from the stage of history. Identifying such a landmark inevitably suggests a clear breaking point and concomitant transformation of empire into novel sovereign or sovereignty-seeking entities. This assumption of a clean break from empire to nation-states obscures the dynamics of imperial dissolution, the uncertainties that accompany it, and the alternative paths that present themselves.

Empires forfeit their vitality and possessions and vanish after they are reduced to remains in which time-honored practices of rule and social organization lose efficacy and relevance. Both the parts that splinter off and any remaining rump may then reenvision or reconstitute themselves in a different political form, as new or existing leadership cadres within the fragments rechannel ideological, human, and economic resources to internal consolidation. Imperial fragmentation bringing forth nation-states is a familiar process that followed the demise of Europe's land empires at the beginning of the twentieth century. Secession and shrinkage are not intrinsically sufficient conditions for empire's devolution or transmutation into nation-states. Nor is significant geopolitical rupture or territorial loss necessary for empire-to-nation transformation, as the modern experience of the "ancient empires" of Iran and China has demonstrated.¹

Imperial institutions, habits, and practices of governance may persist or modify only gradually for a period of indeterminate length. In Russia,

fragmentation occurred after the 1917 Revolution, but the resulting state entities did not crystallize as independent nations until several decades later, notwithstanding the Kremlin's official rhetoric of "sovereign republics" throughout the Soviet period.

The metamorphosis of an imperial vestige—an offshoot or the rump—into a nation-state is thus not foreordained, nor does it occur by default. The precise shape of the geopolitical mosaic that supplants empire is the result of contestation and contingency. The use or threat of military force, diplomacy, geography, economic ties, new conceptions of political community and identity, and foreign hegemony may produce novel political processes and geopolitical and demographic outcomes. Alternative paths of state rebuilding present themselves, as diverse choices are made by or for the peoples. If and when novel entities result from these processes, each creates structures to assert a self-contained existence and frequently myths of nationhood reaching back to "times immemorial."² For instance Hittite, Pharaonic, Phoenician, and Babylonian roots of Turkish, Egyptian, Lebanese, and Iraqi nations have become prominent strands in the respective national narratives.³

Official histories identify key dates, sanctify lines drawn in the sand, and glorify or discredit personalities, often retrospectively, in the construction of teleological narratives. Boundaries created thus, whether chronological, geographical, ideological, or primordial, tend to obscure uncertainties, fluidities, and contestations. Histories of the new states in the Middle East accept the termination of the Great War's hostilities in 1918 as marking the end of empire and the liberation of nations, obscuring the intricacies of collective consciousness in each area as well as the persistence of shared allegiances and cognitive maps formed within the Ottoman imperial system. They depict empire as a structure that confined and suppressed the nation, emancipating it only at the fateful hour of empire's departure from history. In these narratives, bonds formed by time-honored commonalities and shared histories within the imperial framework and operative in the post-World War I half decade fade away, as does the subsequent deliberate, tangled, and often violent construction of the nations within newly determined borders.

Segmented national narratives of Ottoman successor states have obscured the salience of imperial dynamics and practices in the early twentieth-century Middle East.⁴ Popular and most elite allegiances did not transform, nor did extant identities "surface," abruptly. Memories and myths of national indignities under the empire distort the portrayal of the political and social vicissitudes of the immediate post-World War I period. The abiding premise of

these narratives is that a decaying Ottoman Empire was swept away during World War I, and military defeat and the breakdown of wartime government released latent and clashing ethnonationalisms, as the perfidy of war's victorious powers endeavored to quash national aspirations.

The dominant trends of historical and related social science scholarship have reinforced fragmented nation-centric historical outlooks. The paradigm of Western modernity, which long dominated the writing of the recent history of the non-Western world, upheld the nation as an intrinsic feature, indeed the agent, of modernization. The modernization theory's critics privileged Marxist perspectives to explain the stunted development of Middle Eastern and other non-Western states as the result of economic dependency on the West, though generally without questioning the primacy, if not inevitability, of the nation-state.⁵ In the prolific theoretical work on nationalism since the 1980s, the hegemony of the nation in historical studies and social sciences in general has been duly recognized.⁶ The efforts of historians and social scientists to upend the conventional, primordially biased understandings of nations and nationalism have dovetailed with a cognate concern in postcolonial and cultural studies to decenter the European model of the nation.⁷

While globalization and regional integration have undermined the nation's hegemony, the dissolution of the Soviet system has demonstrated that the nation is far from being an obsolescent or retrograde form. Conflicts waged in the name of the nation have not abated. Nation and nation-state remain in the Middle East as the predominant sociopolitical frame, despite challenges from supranational and particularistic movements. Correspondingly, the near hegemony of the nation has prevailed not only in the study of the contemporary Middle East but also in the histories of the late World War I and the postwar interlude, which the present study investigates. In Ron Suny's words, "The historiography of the end of the Ottoman Empire, much of it genuinely scholarly but too much of it polemical and propagandistic, has been shaped by contemporary politics framed within the legitimizing limits of nationalist normality."⁸

The premise of this study is that the retrospective projection of the certainty of the nation and the nation-state to the 1910s and early 1920s has obfuscated the history of this period of upheaval. In recent decades, the emergence of overarching Islamic political projects, quests for broad regional unity, vibrant faith-based solidarity groups, and ethnic/sectarian realignments have contested the primacy of the nation in the region and loosened its strictures as analytical prism. The different ideologies, allegiances, and

notions of political organization inherent in these currents have roots coeval with nationalism. They vied with the nation and with one another at the time of imperial dissolution.

PERIODIZATION

If the presupposed “normality” of the nation has been a straitjacket in the investigation of the Middle East in the late 1910s and early 1920s, conventional periodization has posed a concomitant constraint. The end of the world war in November 1918 accompanied by the collapse of Europe’s imperial regimes led to the splintering of their domains into nation-states and a proliferation of sovereign states unmatched until European decolonization in the post–World War II period. In the Middle East, however, the transition from empire to nation-states can be understood best by distancing oneself from 1918 as the watershed it was for the European states. Such an approach will highlight the differences in the Ottoman war experience from that of other belligerents and offer a more apposite framework to analyze the Middle Eastern transformations in the 1910s and the early 1920s.

Continual warfare marked the period from 1911 to 1922 in the Middle East, with only brief periods of respite. Embroiled in a defensive war in North Africa in 1911 upon the Italian occupation of Libya, the Ottoman government had to vie for peace (Treaty of Ouchy on October 18, 1912) in order to be able to confront a more vital threat from an alliance of Balkan states (“Balkan League”) of Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and Greece, all former Ottoman possessions that had become independent by 1908. In 1912 and 1913, the Ottoman Empire fought their armies, which overran Ottoman territories in Macedonia and Thrace; captured the empire’s former capital, Edirne; and threatened the contemporary capital, Istanbul. In the ensuing peace treaty signed on May 30, 1913 (Treaty of London), Istanbul conceded all the empire’s European possessions except eastern Thrace, the hinterland of Istanbul, which included Edirne. The following year, the Ottoman state entered World War I and left it in defeat in 1918. The wartime British occupation of the empire’s southern (“Arab”) provinces, followed by French and Greek seizure of Ottoman territories galvanized an anti-colonial resistance, protracting the hostilities with Britain, France and Greece until the end of 1922.⁹

From the viewpoint of diplomatic and military history, the division of the decade-long warfare into distinct phases (the Libyan War, the Balkan Wars,

World War I, and the War of Independence) has an apparent rationale. Yet this periodization misinforms the investigation of the overall effect of warfare on politics, society, and the shaping of ideology. For the masses that faced mobilization, requisitioning, famine, relocation, and other economic and social deprivations and hardships connected with the war, the decade of warfare was less fragmentary than the conventional periodization suggests. Political identities and allegiances of both elites and popular groups unfolded over time against the cumulative political, demographic, territorial, and socioeconomic dislocations that accompanied the wars. This “Long War” witnessed a quest to refashion imperial ideology and a redefinition of collective identity, which nation-centric histories elide in pointing to nationalisms as undermining the empire before 1918 and quickly supplanting it after the Ottoman military surrender. Thus, in this representation, 1918 separates not only two distinctive periods of armed conflict, but also the imperial era from the national era. Histories selectively harness the experience of the last decade of the empire’s existence to ideological ends and the needs of national narratives. The long-war view subverts this misconstruction by restoring the fluidity and ambiguities of the interlude in its own right. It allows us to explore the intrinsic possibilities, opportunities, and aspirations in this period frequently erased in teleological accounts, which reflexively appropriate the period between the end of the war and the peace settlement in 1923 for the nation(s).

The liminality of the 1918–1923 period is inherent in the ways in which it is referred to. One of the common designations, the “Armistice Period,” foregrounds the vantage of the imperial government. It encompasses the four years from the miscarried Armistice of Mudros, signed between the Entente powers and the Ottoman government on October 30, 1918, to a second truce, the Armistice of Mudanya, in October 1922.¹⁰ All belligerent parties of World War I, known as the Great War or the European War at the time, understood the armistices of Fall 1918 in Europe and the Middle East as the beginning of negotiations that would lead to peace treaties. The Ottomans’ distinctive experience was that such a treaty would not be settled for four years. Therefore, the protracted “Armistice Period” epitomizes the singular failure to agree on peace terms between the Ottoman Empire and the Allies, with all its political, diplomatic, and military repercussions.

In historical national narratives, the same general period is rendered under different rubrics. Turkey, Syria, and Iraq have characterized the anti-colonial movement against European occupation as struggles for independence, albeit as distinct Turkish, Syrian, and Iraqi movements, obscuring interconnections

at a time of ambivalent political agendas.¹¹ Indeed, the participants in the resistance referred to their quest in terms of devotion to the native land (*al-haraka al-wataniya* [patriotic movement] in Arabic) or the political community (*Milli Mücadele* [popular struggle] in Turkish). The terms *watani* and *milli* both later evolved to be associated semantically with the nation-state.¹² War of Independence (İstiklal Harbi) is rendered in modern Turkish, with some flourish, as the War of Salvation (*Kurtuluş Savaşı*). The seemingly contradictory designations of “armistice” period on the one hand and “war” of independence/salvation on the other reflect the ambiguities and paradoxes of the interlude. The two terms are also indicative of the emergent duality in political authority. From the point of view of the sultan and his government, who sought to preserve his throne and caliphal authority as hostage to the British and French occupation forces in Istanbul, this was the Armistice Period. For the popular forces that opposed occupation, it was a liberation struggle.

Fall 1918 did not signify for the Middle East a closure similar to the experience of the other land empires of Europe. Russia had effectively left the war with the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917. Within about a year of the armistices, the defeated Central Powers, except for the Ottoman state, signed peace treaties which legitimized new regimes. War and revolution revamped the political geography of eastern and central Europe and consigned the Habsburg and Romanov empires to history. The expiration and replacement of imperial monarchies and formal consummation of international accords notwithstanding, the sociopolitical transformations were far from being seamless. Historians have recently proposed the “extended war” approach as intrinsically relevant to central and eastern Europe as well. The Great War accompanied such momentous dislocations and destruction as to engender renewed and sustained violence “from Baltic States through Russia and Ukraine, Poland, Austria, Hungary and Germany all the way through the Balkans,” as an editorial titled “War in Peace” observed in Austria.¹³ The post-revolutionary civil war convulsed Russia’s European territories and eastern European countries under its influence.

In the Ottoman Empire, the absence of a peace agreement perpetuated intrigue, violence, and warfare, as local and external actors jockeyed for advantage. The events of the immediate post-World War I period left a heavy imprint on imperial governance and sovereignty and, ultimately, the Middle East’s map; but far from precipitating national states, postwar outcomes stymied the state-seeking projects (e.g., in Syria, the Hijaz, and

Armenia). There is, therefore, merit in stripping this period of the deterministic vantage of national narratives and examining it as the continuation of the beleaguered and truncated empire rather than the gestational period of foreordained nation-states. The assumption of a sharp break between empire and the nation-state along the fault line of 1918 has privileged the utilization of such terminology as “national struggle,” which affirms the teleology of nationness in the Middle East. It ignores the flux and anguish of a search for political identity at a crucial juncture in the region’s history, as it excises the Ottoman backdrop from the narratives of the nation-states that came of age in the interwar period.

NORMALITY OF NATION AND THE OTTOMAN PAST: HISTORIOGRAPHY AND SOURCES

The approach of official and national histories to the Ottoman past of the region is problematic not only in their nation-centric outlook on the World War I years and the immediate aftermath but also in their tendency to delegitimize the Ottoman reign as alien and/or stiflingly oppressive.¹⁴ A corollary of this assessment, the view of the Ottoman state as the prison of the nation, if not as colonizer, is a retrospective and anachronistic characterization. Arab histories have tended to expunge the four centuries of Ottoman rule by leaping from the glory of the Arab states in the medieval period directly to the beginnings of Arab national consciousness or “Arab awakening” in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.¹⁵ Accordingly, conventional histories of the Arab lands during the long Ottoman era treated political, social, and cultural processes in isolation, with scant attention to ties to Istanbul or the rest of the Empire. By disowning the legacy of Ottoman governance, they dispensed with commonalities with other Ottoman peoples, reaching into history only to identify the strands of long-standing but woefully suppressed nationhood.¹⁶

A parallel, albeit distinctively schizophrenic, approach long characterized the Turkish Republican approach to Ottoman history. Early Turkish national narratives labored to set apart Republican history from Ottoman precedents in sharp strokes, positing an alterity between the Ottoman and the new Turk. The elision of the Ottoman “other” from Republican Turkish history fit the logic of the deliberate cultural and institutional disconnect with Ottoman precursors, as effected by measures such as the “clothing

reforms” and the 1928 switch from the Arabic alphabet to the Roman script. Next to this compartmentalization between Republican and Ottoman history, however, there was a contradictory dimension in the relationship to the Ottoman precedents, namely the selective harvesting of history in the service of a useable past.¹⁷ This effort appropriated the high achievements of the Ottoman Empire as evidence of the Turks’ genius and prowess, stemming from a distant mythical past and becoming cyclically manifest in the evolution of the consummate nation. While in Arab narratives the Ottoman past came to signify Turkish domination and a rude intrusion into the course of Arab history from which there is nothing to redeem, Turkish Republican historiography reinforced this vantage with its exclusion of the Ottoman state’s non-Turkish-speaking majority from Turkey’s origin history. It regards the latter-day failures of empire as having been set aright by the Turkish nation and its leading light Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) in the new Republic. Also reinforcing nation-centric approaches are the secular biases of the Kemalist period that associate a maligned Islamic torpor with Arabdom; the Arab histories’ assessment of the Ottoman state as a precursor of colonial rule; and structural attributes of Middle East scholarship (particularly linguistic and methodological specialization in area studies research).

The enduring commonalities between the Arabs and Turks as the main constituent groups within the Ottoman imperium and the tortuous parting of the ways have received scant attention not only in national(ist) histories but also the broader scholarship. Pioneering scholars of Turkey analyzed the Republican transformation as the culmination of a long-standing modernizing process.¹⁸ They confined their close treatment of the Ottoman struggle to keep pace with modernity to the Turkish element and implicitly acknowledged the nation, a salient concomitant of modernity, as having already taken form in the dwindling empire. The appropriation of the Ottoman past for the Turks has elided Arab and other groups’ sociopolitical and cultural experiences from the narrative. Modernity thus emerged as the preserve of the Turks in the linear narrative culminating in Republican Turkey. More recently, scholars have found the opportunity for cross-fertilization with a willingness to move away from a nationalist perspective in history writing and a readiness to investigate the broad canvas of the ecumenical Ottoman backdrop. Yet attention to contact, impact, and overlap between ideological, cultural, and political trends in Istanbul/Anatolia and the Arab provinces, including during and after World War I, has remained outside the mainstream of historical research.¹⁹

A productive debate on the revolutionary claims of the Kemalist movement and historiography has partially eroded the dissociation of “imperial” and “national” historiographies. Insisting on an absolute break, albeit revolutionary in magnitude, without due appraisal of long-term incremental transformations can be facile. Erik Zürcher has made a compelling and sustained case for organic continuity in political organization, institutions, and leadership from the Young Turk period to the war of independence and into the Republic.²⁰ Others, among them the preeminent historian of the era immediately preceding the Republic, Feroz Ahmad, are partial to a significant break in the 1920s as manifested in substantive institutional and ideological transformations.²¹ Reşat Kasaba takes the side of rupture in approaching the subject from the vantage of transmutations in collective identities and socio-political visions against the background of the Long War’s upheavals.²² The debate’s virtue lies in that neither position can be defended without scrutiny of oft-dismissed Ottoman precedents.

Yet other historians point to alternative junctures as the breaking point. Aykut Kansu privileges the 1908 Revolution, which he sees as having ensued from socioeconomic upheaval in the eastern Anatolian provinces, over the “Kemalist Revolution.”²³ Scholars who argue for pivotal demographic transformations and accompanying coercive population policies accept 1913, the denouement of the Balkan Wars, as the beginning of an era when the Ottoman political leadership starts “seeing like a nation-state.”²⁴ Their works dovetail with those that examine the violent decade of the Long War within the paradigm of genocide studies, which underscores abiding state responsibility and accountability and thus privileges robust organic linkages over time to the detriment of contingency and transmutation.²⁵

By scripting the postwar half decade into fragmented national histories, mainstream scholarship has been complicit in the proverbial “exaggeration of the death” of empire. Even the historian with whom nationalism or secularism has little purchase has not seen merit in studying a period that has subsequently come to be associated with the fraying of time-honored institutions and ushered in the indignities of foreign overbearance. The political and social processes as well as ideological formulations that accompanied this period of upheaval and deep uncertainty remain in relative obscurity. Yet nation-state-oriented thinking and presumption of imminent and inevitable imperial demise alone do not explain the misrepresentation or neglect of the immediate postwar years. The nature and limited availability of historical sources from the transition period have reinforced the neglect. After 1918,

military collapse, foreign occupation, attenuation of resources, breaks in parliamentary proceedings, curtailment of diplomatic representation, and fragmentation of political authority took a further toll on the production of official records. In the Ottoman documentary evidence of the post–World War I years, the same stoical disposition prevails as in past transition periods marked by territorial loss, such as in the aftermath of the Berlin Treaty (1878) or the Balkan Wars (1912–13). The mere fact that the Istanbul governments generated and dispensed documents until 1922 (simply crossing out the names of provinces where Ottoman officials ceded authority to occupation forces) attests to the endurance of empire and the self-view of the Ottoman state cadres.

In the reconstruction of social and political processes in areas where foreign occupation obviated the Ottoman administrative structure, diplomatic archives and registers of popular movements gain especial importance. Retrospective ego documents, particularly memoirs, throw light on the postwar interlude but tend to read back in time the virtues of the nation and indulge in self-vindication and self-promotion, distorting an accurate appraisal of political inclinations and worldviews during the historical window of the immediate postwar years. They must be read with more than the customary caution for such sources. Those written during the authoritarian presidency of Mustafa Kemal (1923–1938), in particular, were open to opprobrium, if not sanction, and displayed a tendency for ingratiating and self-promotion.²⁶

One retrospective source stands out in its aura and extraordinary impact on the historiography, and in particular, on the production of “correct” national history in Turkey, and therefore the shaping of a modern collective self-view: Mustafa Kemal’s *Nutuk* (or Speech), an oration he delivered in 1927 before the congress of the Republican People’s Party for six consecutive days.²⁷ It is an account of Kemal’s role in the struggle for independence after he arrived in the Black Sea town of Samsun on May 19, 1919, and proceeded to join the resistance in defiance of his assigned duties as military inspector. The speech is memoir, diary, documentary evidence, historical vindication, and ideological manifesto all at once.²⁸ *Nutuk* remains as the basis of textbook accounts of these years in “Turkish Revolution” classes, mandatory for all university students in Turkey, and has been internalized by generations of historians. In the words of one such influential historian, “With Atatürk’s speech, the history of this [national] struggle found its authentic expression from its official and most authoritative spokesperson.”²⁹ Delivered and written soon after the repression of a major rebellion in Kurdish territories, but

before the full formulation and inculcation of an ethno-racial Turkish identity, *Nutuk* excises the Arab peoples from the history of the empire's twilight.

Hegemonic national narratives obscure local organizational initiatives and leadership instrumental in the shaping of the Great War's aftermath, especially in the Anatolian-Syrian-Mesopotamian frontier. Local histories are a valuable source but tend to exhibit the same nation-centric bias as the memoirs. The autobiographical or biographical element is preponderant in some of these accounts, which typically belabor the role of a town, region, or local hero in the national project, with self-congratulatory glorification and often an agenda of one-upmanship.³⁰ Generally drafted by amateur historians, these accounts tout and vindicate "patriotism based on locality."³¹ Yet, far from interrogating the broad strokes of national histories, these sources strive to plug local and regional struggles into the master narrative of the nation and thus take for granted the framework and teleology of the nation as they strive for validation of contribution toward its success. Local histories have not adequately insinuated themselves into general accounts, in part because of their obscure publishers and poor circulation. Read between the lines, these books offer valuable information for a more nuanced understanding of the period and reveal dynamics that cannot be restricted to the hegemonic framework of the nation. The customary emphasis on the Anatolian resistance as personified by Mustafa Kemal and the government he presided over in Ankara after April 1920 not only subverts the decentralized struggles but also reinforces the foregone conclusion of the empire's bankruptcy.

Anti-colonial resistance and the struggle for independence have received considerably more attention from the historians of Turkey than the inglorious World War I.³² Many studies that address aspects of the postwar half decade (e.g., social and political organizations, local uprisings, the press, etc.) follow closely the outline and presuppositions of official history. Even those works that question such premises of the historical canon as the secular thrust of the struggle for independence view the communal framework of the nation and the physical framework of the nation-state as settled.³³ The contingencies of the Long War recede against the certainties of national redemption and the inevitability and finality of the empire's demise. The retrospective Kemalist vision of the nation and the Wilsonian schema reinforce each other in both Turkish and Western historiography in presuming a match between territory and the essential nation. The Long War perspective proposed in this study highlights continuities that the Kemalist paradigm subverts.³⁴ This book seeks to expand the history of the empire-to-nation

transition chronologically as well as geographically by restoring the linkages in the Anatolia-Syria-Mesopotamia nexus overlooked in histories of national development.

The division of the Fertile Crescent into multiple states controlled by Britain and France engendered disjointed struggles and accommodations with the colonial powers to forge new nations accompanied by myths of long-standing distinctiveness and cohesion. The short-lived Arab government set up in Damascus (1918–1920) has attracted scholarly attention in its own right as the precursor of the Syrian state.³⁵ Scholars who are cognizant of Syria's emplacement in the Ottoman ambit have of late written about interactions within the broader region in diachronic studies. This book benefits from this strand in the scholarship that emphasizes continuity and interregional dynamics and seeks to build upon them.³⁶

TERMINOLOGY AND ITS PITFALLS

Ambiguities in evolving and differential meanings of concepts across time, geography, linguistic domains, and self-views present challenges that defy resolution by way of a simple terminological excursus outlining established usage or a template that guides the reader with authorial definitions. The connotations of certain key analytical terms may intersect in different regional and cultural idioms without complete overlap against a wide definitional range. Even when vocabulary is shared, associated concepts have often evolved differentially, as novel understandings have inflected earlier ones. Further, terms rarely translate to other languages (in our case, Turkish and Arabic to English) with their original valences intact. In the present study these challenges are palpable. I address some of the terminological issues and their conceptual implications at apposite junctures in the book.³⁷

A paramount example related to the quandary of shifting meanings is the term *millet* with its conceptual range and variations across time, geography, and languages.³⁸ Within the Ottoman system *millet* referred to religio-sectarian communities to which the state accorded a degree of autonomy.³⁹ In Ottoman history (and the Ottoman language), *millet* was occasionally used to signify the Muslim community as well. Later in the nineteenth century, especially in the pen of intellectual-bureaucratic reformist authors, *millet* gained currency in reference to the political community of the Ottoman Empire and totality of its people, namely an overarching Ottoman millet, the