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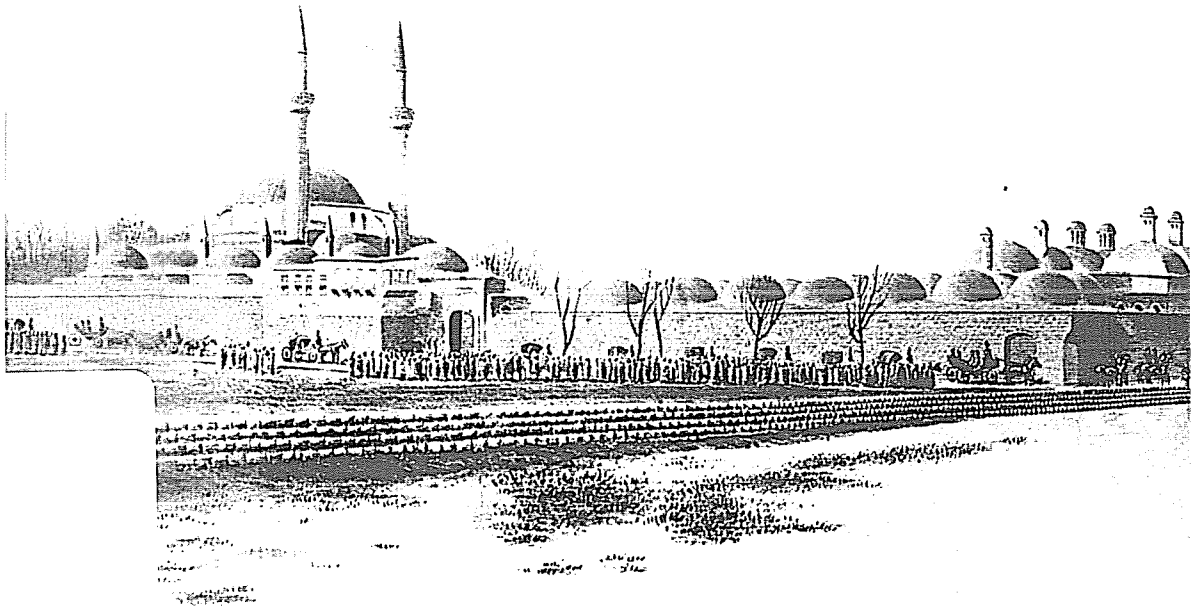
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## How Should we Study the History of Ottoman Rule in Bilad Al-Sham?

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First of all, I must confess that while I was deciding on my topic, I was inspired by the late Albert Hourani's talk on the question of "How Should We Write the History of the Middle East?" He gave this talk at the joint conference of the British and French Associations for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies in Paris in 1989 and a revised version of it was published in the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) in 1991. I must also admit that the title of my paper is too general to address in a Congress paper. In fact it deserves to be discussed in a special conference where every aspect of the history of Ottoman rule in the Arab provinces could be dealt with. Therefore what I will do in this paper is to address a few issues related to the modern period of Ottoman history in this region. By modern period I mean the period between the French occupation of Egypt in 1798 and the Ottoman withdrawal from Bilad al-Sham in 1918. More specifically, I will focus on some aspects of the nineteenth century political history of this region.

Let me begin by pointing out two main areas of serious difficulties related to the study of history of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bilad al-Sham: First, European penetration into the region, second, post-Ottoman formation of the Middle East.

**European Penetration:** After the French occupation of Egypt, Bilad al-Sham area became a permanent issue in the agenda of the European big powers, especially Britain, France and Russia in the first half and Germany in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Rivalry over control of this region deeply influenced relations between different communities, as well as relations between the

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Ottoman Empire as a ruling power and local population. The weakness of the central administration that was engaged in serious reforms was another important factor to complicate the developments in the region. Not surprisingly this period witnessed deteriorating relations between the ruler and the ruled. As time progressed, the European powers increased their intervention in local developments, strengthened their ties with local communities and became an important factor in determining the course of events in the region. Finally, it must be added that the two major European colonial powers, Britain and France, fought against the Ottoman Empire in the World War I and Bilad al-Sham region was an important battleground.

Now, what is the relevance of these developments to the study of history of the region? When we examine the available literature on this period, be it written in western or eastern languages, we will see that overwhelming majority of them, at least until recent years, was based on archival materials of the European colonialist powers: primarily on British, French and to a lesser extent on German sources. A few of them had references to some Arabic sources, mostly memoirs which were generally written during the period when the Arab-Turkish relations were at the lowest level, hence contained serious innate deficiencies. In very few instances we come across references to Ottoman sources. Thus the literature on the political history of this region is by and large based on or at least heavily coloured by the sources of European colonialist powers and written generally from a Euro-centric perspective. In other words, insiders' view of their history has not yet received due attention and the modern history of this region had generally been written from the accounts of the "other", not from the accounts of the "self"; here the "self" is used for the Arabs and Turks.

What is wrong with the accounts of the "other"? I will give you two examples to demonstrate why we should be extremely careful while using the accounts of the "other". The first belongs to the British consul general Eldridge who served in Beirut for years. In other words he was not a newcomer. In April 1878 when the British government was in search of a base in the Mediterranean, Eldridge reported:

*The possibility and probability of an English occupation of Syria are now freely discussed by all classes of population. The general tendency, as far as I can learn, is greatly in favour of such an occupation, and the desire to see it*

*accomplished is strong and almost universal, especially amongst the native Mussulmans, and, in my opinion, it could be effected without difficulty, or without opposition on the part of the inhabitants, in case it should become necessary to take this step, though the Turkish authorities might possibly make a show of resistance for form's sake.*<sup>2</sup>

Two separate developments proved that what Eldridge reported was actually wishful thinking. The first was that, towards the end of Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-1878 some Syrian dignitaries, including Amir Abdulkadir al-Jazairi, discussed the possibility of a foreign occupation of Syria and after long sessions they concluded that in such a case they would fight for independence, not opt for British occupation.<sup>3</sup> The second, when the British occupied Egypt in 1882 there was a strong reaction in Syria and especially Muslim population of Syria demonstrated their willingness to support the Egyptians against the British. Strangely, Ottoman authorities, in collaboration with the British, had to work hard to preserve tranquillity and keep the inhabitants of this province under control.<sup>4</sup> There is no need to mention strong Arab reaction to the British and French presence in this region.

The second example belongs to James Zohrab, the British consul in Jeddah. Secret relations between Zohrab and the Sharif Huseyin led him to believe that “the time appears to have arrived when England must cease temporising with Turkey... We are bound to seize every means [and] every weapon... to establish our authority over Mussulmans. If we establish an influence by a kind of protectorate in the Hijaz, we will be able to govern the whole Muhammedan world”<sup>5</sup>. As this quotation clearly shows, Zohrab's reports on the Hijaz were so much influenced by his imperialist mind that the British Ambassador to Istanbul Sir Henry Layard felt the need to advise his superiors that Zohrab should be “warned to be very prudent and cautious in his communications with the Sharif”.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> PRO, FO, 226/195 Eldridge to Derby, no. 33 political, confidential, Beyrouth, 10 April 1878.

<sup>3</sup> Adil al-Sulh, *Sutur min al-Risala*, Beirut, 1966, p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> For details of Muslim reaction in Syria and its environs see Ş. Tufan Buzpınar, “The Repercussions of British Occupation of Egypt on Syria, 1882–1883”, *Middle Eastern Studies* (MES), 36/1 (January 2000), p. 82–91.

<sup>5</sup> PRO, FO, 78/3131, Zohrab to Alston, Private, Cairo 12 January 1880.

<sup>6</sup> IOR, L/P&S/3/246, Layard to Salisbury, no. 302, secret, Constantinople 12 March 1880.

As well-known, until recently western diplomatic sources were extensively used without due caution in writing the history of this region. Works based almost solely on Western sources and under the influence of Western political dominance had enormous impact on the course of historiography of Ottoman rule in Bilad al-Sham. The literature in this category generally put the Arab provinces in a central position as if they were independent political entities and the Ottoman central government in a peripheral position. From this perspective the Ottoman governments played only marginal roles in anything good, but bear important responsibility for anything that undesired. An obvious example of this is the *Arab Awakening* by George Antonious, first published in 1938.<sup>7</sup> Even the title is worth debating and it is once described as “a tissue of doubtful historical statements, marshalled to form an apologia for the cause of Arab nationalism”.<sup>8</sup> It was a very influential work until the 1960s when writings of historians like Ernest Dawn and Albert Hourani clearly showed serious deficiencies of Antonious’ work. Now it is seen as an example of Western minded Arab nationalist history writing.

During the same period, another type of Arab elite emerged who negated the Ottoman identity and thus had to “abandon, reject and deny its actual history. For elements out of which to reforge a new identity, it turned to a ready-made, pre-Ottoman, purely Arab-Islamic” history.<sup>9</sup> The best example to illustrate this point is, *History of the Arabs* by Philip Hitti. If you examine its contents, you will see how little space is spared for the history of Ottoman rule in the Arab provinces. Hourani explains the reason why Hitti avoided writing the Ottoman past of the Arabs: “Hitti came to stay with my parents in Manchester, probably in 1935.<sup>10</sup> He had just finished his *History of the Arabs*, and I asked what period it covered. He told me that apart from a short epilogue on the last century and a half, he had ended in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. I asked him why he had ignored the centuries in between, and he said: “There was no Arab history then”.<sup>11</sup> You may

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<sup>7</sup> George Antonious, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of Arab National Movement*, Beirut, 1955. Afterwards it was reprinted several times, and now it is available in paperback.

<sup>8</sup> Elie Kedourie, *England and the Middle East: The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire 1914-1921*, London, 1987, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>10</sup> First edition was published in 1937.

<sup>11</sup> Hourani, “How Should We Write the History of the Middle East?”, *IJMES*, 23 (1991), p. 129.

think that it is an old book, outdated and not a right example to cite. On the contrary, it is still widely in circulation, I have the revised tenth edition published in 2002. It has not been changed much since its first publication in 1937 and has a 35 page section on the Ottoman Rule in the Arab provinces (pp. 709-744). It was translated into Arabic and Turkish. Interestingly it was translated into Turkish as *İslam Tarihi* ("Islamic History") and it was printed several times.<sup>12</sup>

Disagreeing with Hitti, Hourani concludes that "we are all aware now of the importance of the Ottoman centuries" and no wonder why he wrote his last book, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, published in 1991—almost two years before his death in 1993—. He devoted six chapters to the Ottoman period in the Arab lands (pp. 209-314). This book is also translated into many Eastern and Western languages including Arabic and Turkish.

To illustrate the impact of Euro-centric view on the historiography of the period again we will cite one of Hourani's well-known works as an example. I am sure we are all aware of the importance of *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*. When I was a student in Britain in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, two of the books that students of the history of the Middle East had to read were *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* by Hourani and *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* by Bernard Lewis. Today it is more or less the same. If you look at the relevant literature, you will see that Hourani's work is one of the most cited references. Let us now listen what Hourani had to say about his most famous book:

It now seems to me to have been wrong in laying too much emphasis upon ideas which were taken from Europe, and not enough upon what was retained, even if in a changed form, from an older tradition...In trying to explain the history of the Middle East in modern times we should always be aware of two interlocking rhythms of change: that which reforming governments and thinkers and external forces tried to impose upon society and that which a great stable society with a long and continuous tradition of thought and of life in common was producing from within itself, partly by its own internal movement, and partly in reaction to forces coming from outside.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> P. K. Hitti, *İslam Tarihi: Siyasi, Kültürel*, I-IV (translated by Salih Tuğ), İstanbul, 1980.

<sup>13</sup> Hourani, "How Should We Write...", pp. 128-129.

Hourani's confession brings us to the question of how representative the sources we use in writing the modern history of Bilad al-Sham are. Are the surviving materials truly representative? I would like to draw attention to two possible dangers here: One is that the historian himself/herself might be imbued with the idea of modernism and while writing the history of this period emphasise modern/western orientated developments and ignore the others. Furthermore, traditional attitudes and groups in the society are negated and depicted as reactionary forces. Thus we have studies that take successor nation states as their main points of departure and naturally emphasise developments that led to a particular nation state (**Modernity paradigm**).<sup>14</sup> The second is that in writing the history of this period, consciously or unconsciously, we might be influenced by those sources that belong to the so-called modernist-reformist group of the period we are concerned with. I suspect that those sources constitute the majority of the available material in native languages as well as in others. Maybe Hourani was a victim of this kind of sources.

By these examples I am not trying to say that the above-mentioned sources are without value in writing the history of Bilad al-Sham. On the contrary, I think we should use all the available sources. To say the least, the European diplomatic correspondences provide clear and sound indications about European designs on this region, their relations with the natives and the way they saw the political aims of their rivals. Moreover, consular reports contain information on some developments that were seen as being interesting and therefore reported to their superiors; whereas, for Ottoman and Arab officials it was an ordinary event and therefore it did not deserve to be reported. The material left by the local modernist-reformists is no less valuable than the others so long as they are properly consulted.

Needles to say, we must be extremely cautious when we are consulting the above-mentioned sources and use them together with native sources, namely Ottoman and Arab sources. It is like listening to all the witnesses while keeping their identities and aims in mind, and then making our own decisions. I will give you an example why we cannot avoid using European diplomatic sources. As it is known, Amir Hussein of Mecca, who was assassinated in March 1880, had

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<sup>14</sup> A good example to illustrate this point is *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* by Bernard Lewis. The third edition of this book was published in 2002.

secret relations with the British. You can write almost nothing on the nature of these relations by using Ottoman and Arab sources. Ottoman archival sources only indicate that something was going on between the Amir and the British, but that was all. Whereas by using the British sources you can establish a clear and sound line of relationship between the two.<sup>15</sup> Here is another example to show this time how the British sources were insufficient to explain what was going on in Syria. Again many of you are well aware of the placard affairs in Beirut, Damascus and other principal cities of Syria in the early 1880s. The historiography of the placard affairs is generally based on the Western diplomatic sources and it is presented as a genuine local reaction to the Ottoman rule in the region. In none of them you can see any reference to the degree of local reaction, or to the level of cooperation of local dignitaries with the Ottoman authorities in identifying the responsible people, and to prevent any possible disturbance in the area. On the other hand, Ottoman archival sources provide substantial information about those issues and you can see a petition signed by 99 of Damascus dignitaries and another petition signed by 37 Beirut dignitaries to display their loyalty to the Ottoman State and helped local authorities in finding culprits.<sup>16</sup>

**Post-Ottoman Formation of the Middle East:** As far as the study of history of Ottoman rule in Bilad al-Sham is concerned, some major developments should be mentioned. First is the presence of the British and the French in the region until after the World War II and the establishment of the State of Israel. Second is the establishment of new states after the demise of the Ottoman Empire. Very briefly, the colonizing powers produced huge anti-Ottoman literature in order to legitimize their presence in the region and present themselves more friendly to the Arabs than the Ottomans were. Some of their officials served in distinguished universities of those countries. I will give you an example to illustrate how it affected the study of history of this region. I am sure; many of you know Prof. Elie Kedourie and his book *England and the*

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<sup>15</sup> See Ş. Tufan Buzpınar, "The Hijaz, Abdulhamid II and Amir Hussein's Secret Dealings with the British, 1877-1880", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 31/1 (January 1995), pp. 99-123.

<sup>16</sup> Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA), Yıldız Sadaret Resmî Maruzat Evrakı (Y.A. Res), 9/64, 13 Safer 1298/15 January 1881. For a reassessment of the placard affairs see Ş. Tufan Buzpınar, "Osmanlı Suriyesi'nde Türk Aleyhtarî İlanlar ve Bunlara Karşı Tepkiler, 1878-1881", *İslâm Araştırmaları Dergisi/Turkish Journal of Islamic Studies*, 2 (1998), pp. 73-89.

*Middle East: The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire, 1914-1921*. It was originally written as a Ph.D. thesis and submitted to the University of Oxford. H.A.R. Gibb was one of the examiners and refused the thesis on the grounds that it was not in line with the statements of British officers (particularly Sir Percy Cox) who served in the Arab provinces during and after the WWI.<sup>17</sup> I am not quite sure how safe the present day historians are from the influences of the propaganda literature produced in those days.

The division of Ottoman Arab provinces among the European victors of the WWI and subsequent formation of several states in the region led to another development, namely, regional nationalism. As a result, we see a new pattern of Arab scholarship emphasising regional nationalism. The newly established "states are anachronistically identified with the previously undifferentiated regional identities and projected back into earlier centuries. Thus one finds articles written about sixteenth or seventeenth-century "Tunisian", "Egyptian" or "Syrian" nationals who visited the Ottoman court... The feeling that one was an "Iraqi" first and an Arab second was nourished in new schools and taught through textbooks freshly created to foster the new identity".<sup>18</sup> Similar methodological problems occurred during the 1950s and 60s; this time related to the ideology of Pan-Arabism. By the same token, we are faced with an important amount of counter literature produced by anti-Western elements in the successor states to the Ottoman Empire.

In conclusion, historians of the Ottoman rule in Bilad al-Sham should make use not only the vast archives of the Ottoman central government in İstanbul, but those in the provincial cities like Damascus, Aleppo and Kudiüs which are of equal and for some subjects of even greater importance. They include administrative papers as well as the court records (*Sicils*). There are also documents of *waqf* administrations which can help to explain religious, social and economic history of this region. I am sure some other speakers will also demonstrate the importance of using native sources as well as the sources of others. But this is easy said than done. First of all, there has to be a strong belief

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<sup>17</sup> For details of this story, See Elie Kedourie, *England and the Middle East*, London, 1987, pp. 1-8b. This book was first published in 1956.

<sup>18</sup> Rifaat Ali Abou-El-Haj, "The Social Uses of the Past: Recent Arab Historiography of Ottoman Rule", *IJMES*, 14 (1982), p. 186.

on the part of not only the historians but also the governments of respective countries in the absolute necessity of using those sources. Since historians are somehow influenced and affected by political, social and other conditions of their countries, let us hope that governments of successor states to the Ottoman Empire make peace with their Ottoman past, do their best to ease restrictions on studies of history, and more importantly support historians to produce better works in their fields. In this context, I once again thank the organisers of this conference and hope that it will prove to be a great step forward in studies of the history of Ottoman rule in the Arab provinces.