

The Ottoman Scramble for Africa: Empire and Diplomacy in the Sahara and the Hijaz. Mostafa Minawi. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016. ISBN: 9780804799270

Building an empire is a difficult business; sustaining one over a long period of time is practically impossible. The hard-pressed Ottoman Empire faced these stark realities in the late nineteenth century, as European powers seized large chunks of its lands or moved in next door, amidst incessant calls for Ottoman reorganization and reform at home. According to the dominant historiography, the Ottoman leadership, already holding the lowest scores in the imperial game, made a bad situation worse by eschewing fruitful adaptation for passive isolationism. The “sick man of Europe” expired within the next generation, done in by nationalist and religious revolts and an impulsive entanglement in world war.

To Mostafa Minawi, the above conclusion evinces a “blinding teleology of failure” (141), for at the moment of its supposed decline, the Ottoman Empire was represented at that most exclusive of imperial get-togethers, the 1885 Berlin Conference. Many scholars characterize the conference seat as a meaningless European sop to the Ottomans, akin to moving a grandparent into the guest room as an intermediate step to the nursing home. In his quick study of Ottoman diplomacy in the era of New Imperialism, Minawi counters that the Ottomans were nobody’s fools: determined to get in on the ensuing “Scramble for Africa,” they went to Berlin with an agenda of their own. Ottoman claims encompassed the eastern Sahara and the Lake Chad basin, coterminous “hinterlands” to Ottoman-held Libya and thus rightfully theirs according to the Berlin rules. French encroachments into the area angered but did not daunt Sultan Abdul Hamid II’s administrators, who shifted from frustrated territorial expansion in Africa to successful infrastructural consolidation in the Arabian peninsula. In spite of European double-dealing,

stringent financial limitations, and bureaucratic gridlock, the late nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire proved that it was still a respectable imperial contender.

Four of the book's six chapters detail Ottoman activities in Central Africa. From the coastal enclaves of their Libyan provinces the Ottomans looked south towards the Central Sudanic kingdoms of Kanem-Borno, Wadai, and Bagirmi. Bedouin-intermediated trade with these kingdoms clustered along Lake Chad had tightened after the revival of Ottoman direct rule in Libya in 1835, but the impetus to expand did not arise until after 1881. By that date, having lost nearly all of their holdings in the Balkans in the 1878 Treaty of Berlin, and watching the French and British become involved in Tunisia and Egypt respectively, the Ottoman leadership was ready to venture a counterstroke. Sub-Saharan expansion as a Berlin partner seemed an ideal way for the empire to recoup its losses and demonstrate its potency.

Prior Ottoman imperialism had been as unilateral as that of any other great power, but by 1885 the rules of the game had changed, and the Ottomans knew and accepted this. Minawi repeatedly stresses the Ottomans' willingness to follow the legal protocols outlined at Berlin. To claim and keep the Lake Chad basin, the Ottomans had to demonstrate *effective control*. This required more than making a public announcement of having discovered an area or sending a flag-planting expedition; to borrow modern phrasing, there had to be permanent boots on the ground. Yet the inhospitable climes of the Sahara precluded any attempt to establish an Ottoman settlement or even a small garrison.

As a solution, the Ottomans partnered with the Sanusi Order, a tribal Sufi Islamic *tariqa* (school) that maintained *zawiya* (compounds) near Lake Chad. Frequently described by contemporaries and historians alike as anti-colonial marplots, equally hostile towards Ottomans and European Christians, the Sansui were actually passionate educators instilling proper Muslim

values amongst other sub-Saharan peoples. To the Sanusi, the Ottoman Empire was a source of funds, a locus of religious justification in the person of the sultan, and a friendly polity offering a cloak of protection against European colonialism. To the Ottomans, the Sanusi Order's network of *zawiya* provided a way to legally claim effective occupation of the Lake Chad basin. On the diplomatic front, of course, the Ottomans portrayed themselves as large-and-in-charge, dictating policies to a people favorably disposed towards imperial dominance. In actual practice, Minawi notes, the local power brokers called most of the shots. The Sanusi ruled by proxy, "leverag[ing] their positions...to establish their own style of rule and create their own legacies" (50).

Professing all reverence for the sultan, they were nonetheless intolerant of any overt sign of outsider dominance: Ottoman tax officials, for instance, were accompanied by Sanusi *kalifas* (caliphs) and Ottoman flags were forbidden to fly over the *zawiya*.

Sensing the contingency of Ottoman hegemony in sub-Saharan Africa, the European powers tried to coax separate *zawiya* into new partnerships. When that approach failed, French and British policy towards the Sanusi became more direct, if (ineffectively) cloaked. Minawi highlights several diplomatic incidents involving Ottomans and Europeans---some of them cases of outright espionage---during which the former learned that their claims held little weight. Ottoman diplomats were flummoxed when they spied European maps depicting the Lake Chad basin as a blank space, while being assured by European counterparts that nothing untoward was being planned. A string of angry Ottoman protests availed nothing. To no one's surprise the French took over the Ottomans' claims in order to safeguard their own colonies in Morocco and Algeria.

The last two chapters change the setting from Africa to the Hijaz. As with Libya, the Ottomans had only reestablished direct rule in the Hijaz---the Holy Land of Islam, a constellation

of towns along Arabia's Red Sea Coast---in 1840, after centuries of salutary neglect. Though "many of the privileges that Medina and Mecca enjoyed, such as exemption from taxes and army conscription, remained" (101), Ottoman administrators worked to draw the region into a revised imperial nexus. Telegraph lines, usually installed by non-Ottoman companies, were one way to achieve integration; yet at the same time, the very use of foreign contractors subtly challenged Ottoman sovereignty, especially because European and American telegraph equipment could barely render Arabic script into Morse code. Normally the Ottomans might have relied on non-Ottoman contractors anyway, swallowing their reservations in the name of reduced costs. After the fracas in the Lake Chad basin, however, Ottoman leadership was not about to invite possible interlopers into a key territory. They would rely on their own skills and resources to set up the Hijaz telegraph network.

As with Lake Chad, the project required local partnerships, but there were no partners in the Hijaz as centralized and capable as the Sanusi Order had been, only quarrelling Bedouin clans and recalcitrant provincial governors. Previous accommodations with the Bedouin had guaranteed safety for the yearly *hajj* pilgrim caravans, acceptable to the Bedouin because of their transience. Telegraph lines were another matter: a "landscape-altering presence" (131), they were meant to stay forever.

The Ottomans tried to soothe the clans' irritation with gifts and promises to staff work crews entirely with Bedouins. The Bedouin would not be soothed; "[reading] the poles, telegraph offices, and low-voltage lines" as "a sign of Ottoman colonization of their space" (131), their responses swung from grim tolerance at the beginning of the project to outright resistance near the end. Additionally, the provincial governors, resentful of the direct intervention of the sultan's administrators, frequently ear-marked the telegraph funds---and the Bedouin benevolence funds--

-for other uses. Consequently, the project took longer than anticipated, and Bedouin sabotage of telegraph poles indefinitely postponed critical extension branches. Even so, Minawi contends, the Ottoman leadership was successful in the Hijaz, however much that success was qualified. The completion of telegraph lines to Mecca and Medina by 1910 were visible proof that the Ottoman Empire, while perhaps sick, was not moribund.

Minawi's readers do not have to brave the expanses of the Sahara and the Hijaz all alone; a Syrian-born Ottoman officer, Sadik al-Mouayad Azmzade, serves as their companion from start to finish. Azmzade represents a familiar type: the upwardly-mobile cosmopolitan who thrives in troubled imperial settings. What is better, Azmzade's field reports---appearing as block quotes in the chapter headings and main text---make for enviable primary sources, at once concretely analytical about the Ottoman Empire's problems and opportunities and richly descriptive about its territories and inhabitants. Minawi has envisioned a future biography for Azmzade, and this reviewer earnestly hopes that he writes it.

The immediate virtue of Minawi's study is its brevity: at 146 pages of main text, it certainly does not tax a reader's endurance. All the same, Minawi packs a lot of historiographical analysis into those few pages. Moreover, his narrative transition from Africa to the Hijaz is somewhat jarring, leaving one curious about the exact sequence of events that the Sanusi faced once the Ottomans left and the French moved in. Just a little too complex for an undergraduate class, Minawi's book might well find a place on a graduate seminar syllabus for imperial history, 19<sup>th</sup> century European history, or African or Middle Eastern history, especially if paired with another work of comparable size.

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