



Muslims' Collective Amnesia of the Ottoman Past—and Why We Should Reclaim Our History

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Bismillah-ir-rahman-ir-rahim¹

Abstract

The Ottoman dynasty, which emerged as a small *beylik* in Asia Minor after the conquest of Constantinople (Istanbul) in the fifteenth century, became a major world power that not only shaped West Asia but Europe as well. By the sixteenth century it became a Caliphate which in this period was known as a ‘golden age’ of Ottoman history. However, by the eighteenth century it was depicted as a dynasty in decline and by the nineteenth century it was presented as the ‘sick man of Europe’ that finally was abolished in 1342/1924 and the successor state became known as the Turkish Republic. Much of what has been written regarding Ottoman history has been shaped by ideology, narrative, and language either within academia or by the nation-states that emerged from the Ottoman domains. While many of these narratives are starting to be revised, nonetheless general Muslim engagement (outside academic circles) in knowledge production about the once-powerful Islamic dynasty still continues to lag. While interest has started to increase, it will be argued that there is a need for more Muslim voices to study history in general, and Ottoman history more specifically, so that a plurality of views from within the Muslim worldview can be represented.²

Introduction

Every year, when I meet new students who take my history or Ottoman history classes, I always start by asking a set of questions about why history should matter to Muslims. Do we need more Muslim historians of Islam and Muslims? Do we

¹ All Glory and thanks belong to Allah for it is He who is the Knower of all. Anything written in this essay of any value is from Him and anything that is not is from me alone. I ask Allah to forgive me if at any point of this essay I have slandered or misrepresented any of the people that I have written about.

² I would like to thank Dr. Nameera Akhtar for her efforts in editing and providing valuable feedback on this essay. I would also like to thank the blind reviewer for their insights.

need Muslim historians who can write about any moment in history, whether about Islam or not? What is the role of the historian apart from presenting the past? What about the present and the future? Do historians have any role in speaking about anything apart from the past? Is there a distinct way that Muslims should be writing history, especially their own? Has the history of Islam stopped, or do we still belong to a world where there is a large corpus of Islamic history to be written in the future? Lastly, can history be written from an Islamic perspective?

My students are often taken aback by these questions, as that is not what they expect during the first class of Ottoman history. While Ottoman history is a staple in Turkey (where I live and work), over the past few years I have come to realize that, while Muslims are globally starting to show increasing interest in Ottoman history, they nevertheless know very little regarding the six hundred years of Muslim rule in the Balkans, West Asia, and parts of Africa, furthermore they know even little of the changing ideological trends that are taking place in the writing of Ottoman history. To my students from the Americas, Europe, or say other parts of the Muslim world, I have started asking additional sets of questions: why should Ottoman history in particular matter to you? Should you study Ottoman history? Can it be instructive to your lives? Is Ottoman history simply a history of the Turks or is it part of the vast corpus of Islamic history? Before I even begin teaching a class on the subject, my hope is to get my students to think and reflect.

This essay has three main segments. The first asks the question of whether history can be written from an Islamic perspective that can be instructive for Muslims. The second examines some of the conceptual challenges that exist regarding the writing of history in general and Ottoman history more specifically and asks whether these conceptual notions can be challenged. Finally, the essay provides a brief historical narrative of the Ottoman world in an attempt to introduce the reader to the complex nature of Ottoman history and some of the challenges historians face. The historical narrative section is not a comprehensive study but simply an overview in the hope that the reader is aware that there are a series of more detailed studies on any given specialized period or topic that for obvious reasons can not be discussed in detail in this paper; such is the vastness of the corpus of work written on

Ottoman history. But the hope is that this paper can establish a discussion in which more Muslims will feel invested in the study of Islamic history, especially Ottoman history.

Do Muslims have anything to contribute?

So, how do we, as Muslims, practice history and what can we contribute to Ottoman studies? Apart from learning the shared experiences, traditions, and memories it must be emphasized that Muslims need to be able to write about the past from their worldview. The well-known works of early Islamic history were written from an Islamic perspective and catered to an Islamic worldview: for Muslims, by Muslims. It is important that Muslims contribute to detailed in-depth works in the same vein, to reflect how they see the world, their role in it, and how they are part of a discursive tradition, not mere disinterested observers. In order to have a Muslim worldview when writing about the past, it is important to prioritize our worldview and what is central to it: our beliefs regarding this world, humankind, our values, our purpose, and that which is to follow.³ If Islam is a worldview that provides answers it should be able to inform not just our duties regarding religious rituals and our relationships with others, it should also inform our politics, our ethics, our morality, and the way we attain and interpret knowledge.

Indeed the history of Muslims is not a perfect one. Muslims have made (and will continue to make) mistakes and have even committed crimes. Some may want to emphasize how the Ottomans or any other Muslim may have moved away from the morality of Islam and how we should judge such actions. But we need to be careful not to judge people of the past by the moral standards by which we judge the world today. Instead, we must first make a distinction between the history of Islam and the history of Muslims' actions. At times these themes may be inseparable as Islam is what gives Muslims their name and identity; nonetheless, judging Islam by the

³ S. Parvez Manzoor, "Studying Islam Academically" in *How We Know: Ilm and the Revival of Knowledge*, ed. Ziauddin Sardar (London: Grey Seal Books, 1991), pp. 40-45.

actions of Muslims is a problem of restricting Islam to the disposition of people. To some degree, this method is like focusing on the brushstrokes of the artist on a painting, rather than taking a step back and examining the painting as a whole—people often get lost in the details rather than looking at the bigger picture. When examining Islam, its civilization, or the Ottomans who reigned for six centuries, it is important to first distinguish between the acts of people and what Islam permitted; and secondly, it is important to view a narrative in its entirety. Muslims need not be partisan, but they need to be aware of the units of examination they use when making judgments of Muslims and their past actions. Western academia stresses the importance of rationality when studying the past; the Islamic worldview also promotes rationality, but from its own tradition, a point worth stressing when making judgments of how to write about Islam and Muslims in history. Islam should be examined from its own framework and the Islamic past should be judged by a framework established by the Islamic tradition, even if this framework requires adjustment.

Islam's worldview is rational, its *aqeedah* is rational, and we abide by that which it ordains and we enable that which it permits, facilitating a comprehensive view of this life and the hereafter. The Qur'an and the Sunnah shape this worldview. As a result, the *aqeedah* must be understood so that we know how we establish an Islamic worldview and how knowledge comes from it or interacts with it. Once this is understood, the Qur'an ought to be the manual that Muslims turn to in order to place knowledge in its rightful place; the Qur'an as the heart of the Islamic worldview should drive the way in which Muslims attain and produce knowledge.

In that sense, I argue that even when writing about the past, there are lessons we can take from the Qur'an, which I shall later explain. For a Muslim historian, it is not simply a matter of upholding Qur'anic principles that is important when writing but understanding how we are placed relative to what people have done in the past. While not important in Western academia, I would stress that for the Muslim, the Qur'an as a template should influence how we view ourselves and write about our past; it was certainly central to how Muslim scholars viewed the world and how they wrote about it. Thus, before addressing the need to study

Ottoman history, I would like to stress how the Muslim historian should view the writing of history differently than how it is often viewed in the contemporary world.

The great Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun, when writing his monumental work the *Muqaddimah*, stressed in the opening section—the *kitab al-Ibar*—the need for history writing in Islam. The writing of history was not new for Muslim societies as from the inception Muslim scholars documented the past in great detail, whether it was the *hadith*, the biographies of the *hadith* transmitters, or the life of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ known as the *seerah*. For Ibn Khaldun, history writing was a natural product of any given civilization and Muslims writing about their past were no different than the people who had come before.

However, where Ibn Khaldun was exceptional was in his attempts to explain the necessity of writing history for future generations and why Muslims in particular were required to do so in order to maintain Islam as a civilization. For Ibn Khaldun, the writing of history was to establish that which was the truth, or at least come closer to it, a principle of Islam that every Muslim and scholar should subscribe and aspire to. It was this search for the truth that saw Ibn Khaldun stress that the writing of history ought to be part of the Islamic sciences and tradition; he argued that history writing was in fact an aspect of philosophy. While there are indeed strict criteria regarding the study of the Qur'an and Sunnah, Ibn Khaldun's concern, shared by this author, was that the same type of scholarly vigor can be found wanting when studying history. In fact, in a world where information is so easily misrepresented, now more than ever, the study of the past is susceptible to manipulation, misinformation and, at times, outright untruths.⁴

Muslims have built their identities, worldview, and traditions from what has come before them. While the Qur'an as a book has survived the test of time due to its divine nature, the history writing of the Islamic past has not. This is indeed natural as any comparison between the Qur'an and history writing are somewhat unfair. However, the point is to stress how history can be manipulated, to compromise not

⁴ Syed Farid Al-Attas, *Applying Ibn Khaldun: The Recovery of a Lost Tradition in Sociology*, Routledge, 2015, pp. 75-77.

only the past, but how Muslims in the present view themselves in relation to that past. In that sense, like time travelers, historians may alter a narrative of the past that is bound to have consequences for people in the present.

The need to understand history is important. No doubt the average person who takes an interest in history doesn't view history as part of a larger ideological project. However, it would be to the detriment to the Muslim community if the writing of history, whether Islamic or not, was described as simply events written for our own entertainment. Like Ibn Khaldun, I stress that the writing of history is related to power, and how identity, tradition, and memory are narrated.

As a result, it is important to know who the narrative is written by and whose history is being made and why, and here I don't simply mean an individual, but more importantly from which form of power, whether that be a nation, institutional body, or value system.⁵ For Ibn Khaldun, history was about human social organization; thus, the reader must be aware of the bias of the author's truth-claims regarding the events and narratives that they present. This bias can come from the individual or from the corpus of knowledge that they belong to as no knowledge is neutral. In today's world I would say this bias stems from a worldview that attempts to dictate not only what Islam was but what Islam ought to be.

In order to establish what is truth and be able to deconstruct bias, the historian requires an understanding of the Islamic worldview and must acquire the tools to be able to undertake a study of the past. The study of history requires the ability to read numerous sources and gain a great amount of knowledge about various subject areas. These include knowledge of a people's customs and traditions, the fundamentals of their politics, and the nature of how those societies organize themselves. It thus requires Muslims to be able to write from the inside about their worldview, free of the traps of bias, misinterpretation, and partisanship.⁶

Today the majority of works written about Islamic history are produced within the corridors of Western academia, published in Western journals and/or by Western

⁵ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

⁶ Al-Attas, *Applying Ibn Khaldun*, p. 95.

book publishers who no doubt are impacted by the culture of print capitalism. Today Muslims need truth seekers of the past, as much of their past is under extreme scrutiny which can lead the global Muslim community to feel insecure about Islam. If a single author was to misrepresent Islam or an event, moment, or people in Islamic history, this is far easier to address. But today's writing of history is part of a larger institutional structure in which meta-narratives are established that are assumed to be truth. The machine of history writing in the academic environment represents a form of power that has yet to be replicated by Muslims in the writing of their own history, leaving them exposed to a host of blind spots, and at times outright untruths. That is not to say that Muslims are not studying in academic spaces where they can challenge such claims, but from the epistemology of academic writing, Muslim works very rarely, if ever, are written for the Muslim to provide their life some meaning regarding their past. It is for this reason I stress that whenever any Muslim historian writes that they write from a place that is from their *aqeedah* (creed), in conformity with it, and attempts to establish the principles of the Qur'an and Sunnah in the form and content of what they write. While it may sound strange for the Muslim historian that I am stressing that the Qur'an should be the center of how we write history, I do so because, like Ibn Khaldun, I argue that history and its writing should come from a place in which we must establish the truth and know the past better, that the past must be relatable and instructive in the way the Qur'an is, and that we internalize the Qur'anic principle of establishing that which is true over that which is false.

The Qur'an matters

What lessons can we learn from the Qur'an itself? It is from this point—before even opening any book on Ottoman history—that I start my classes. There is no doubting that, as an *ummah* and part of the human race, there is much to learn from past events. Allah (SWT) Himself continues to remind us of events in the past in an instructive manner. The narratives in the Qur'an are fundamentally instructive; they teach us values, ideals, and how previous civilizations before us came and went. In that sense, no matter how much we may assume that the modern world is

the pinnacle of human civilization, it is merely a stage in human history, a stage that too will eventually end. Some of the narratives are of prophets and others of ordinary people, but what is interesting is that the Qur'an continues to stress the need to "remember" events, peoples, and civilizations of the past, even though we may have no collective memory of those events.

This is because the Qur'an wants us to remember the past; as a result, a fundamental goal of understanding one's own history is not to forget. We must examine our world, our textbooks, buildings, monuments, and traditions so that we do not forget that the Islamic tradition is a rich one, one that has many moments of inspiration but also moments of pain and suffering. Our memories should not simply stretch to what has happened in the immediate past, but beyond. This indicates that with some level of scrutiny of the past, despite the claims of the exceptional nature of modernity, human beings haven't 'progressed' much apart from their technological capacity and that the essence of human beings is one that will remain the same until the end. Thus, the Qur'an constantly reminds us that the people of the past and their experiences do indeed matter.

While not a history book, the Qur'an is a book of authority and so many of the narratives presented in it such as the story of the Prophet Yusuf عليه السلام or the seven sleepers, for example, are signs of the truth. The Qur'an, more importantly, is a key part of the biography of our Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم as on many occasions Allah (SWT) mentions aspects of the Prophet's life, character, attributes, and events he عليه وسلم experienced. In fact, so much of the Qur'an is a response to a host of events in the Prophet's life that to not read his *seerah* alongside the Qur'an does a disservice both to his biography and to one's understanding of the context in which the Qur'an was revealed.

These narratives should matter to us, and one of the interesting things about the Qur'an is the manner in which they are told. The way in which the Qur'an recounts the past is to help the readers (and listeners) imagine it and place themselves in those situations. In showing how history needs to be instructive, the Qur'an highlights the importance of teaching and transmitting history in a manner that is

relatable. The manner in which history is told is, thus, just as important as the information given.

What is also interesting in the Qur'an is the manner in which it approaches the concept of time. The Qur'an is not linear, disrupting our sense of time and reminding us of both the past and the future. Because of the way it is collated, it jumps from the past to the future, connecting the two. As an *ummah* then, it is necessary to learn from past events and peoples to enable us to imagine possible futures.⁷

The past of the Muslim starts with the Prophet Adam عليه السلام—some may argue even before—and ends with our final destination *in sha Allah* in Heaven. As Muslims, then, we believe that we do not only live once, but instead only die once, with this life geared towards the hereafter. Time and place for us are in some ways not linear, to be spent only in this world, but take on an otherworldly dimension too. This needs to be taken into consideration when writing the history of Islam for Muslims, especially how Muslims placed themselves in the timeline of history from the Islamic worldview, constantly linking the past and present together so that we can 'remember' the past and 'imagine' our future. It is my hope that these simple points are indeed internalized when Muslims study their own past, as the actuality of humanity is not one of mere existence that is to be objectively studied. For us, the existence of humanity is fundamentally one about worship and we should view the world with its success and mistakes in order to better engage in worship. It could be argued, as S. Parvez Mansoor has stressed, that current writers continue to view themselves and the past through a 'secularized consciousness,' and it might be important to ask whether there is indeed a different way that Muslims can write their history, and whether the Qur'an can be a central point in the manner in which we think when writing for ourselves.⁸

Thus, the notion of imagining the future is as much a matter of knowing our past from a particular viewpoint irrespective of how much we perceive the world to

⁷ Ziauddin Sardar, *The Future of Muslim Civilization*, (Mansell Publishing Limited, New York, 1987), pp. 181-207.

⁸ Manzoor, "Studying Islam Academically," pp. 40-45.

have changed.⁹ It is thus worth investigating how Muslims of the past identified with Islam in their lives. How did Muslims in the past locate themselves, not only in terms of the time they lived in but also in relation to the past, and how did they perceive their future? While there is evidently a large corpus of work regarding the formative period of Islam, Ottoman studies tends to lack the same level of attention and rigor within Muslim circles. Why has this happened, and is there anything meaningful we can learn from the Ottomans, just as we are encouraged to learn from prior peoples?

Challenging approaches to the teaching and learning of Ottoman Studies

Much of what I have just explained may seem quite straightforward, but I often receive surprising answers to the very same questions by my students—most of whom admit that they had never really thought about these questions. My reply to that is always that it is not too late to start. So now that I have stressed the need to examine whether as Muslims we can write Islamic history differently, I will now explain why Ottoman history matters.¹⁰

There are two main points that I would like to stress regarding the study of Ottoman history. The first is what I feel is a lack of intellectual investment by Muslims, by and large, regarding the understanding of Ottoman history and how students approach it. Second is the problematic manner in which Ottoman history is taught both in Western academia and Muslim seminaries. A purpose of this essay is to also provide a historical overview of the Ottoman world, but it almost equally aims to encourage reflection on the Ottoman past. What can we learn from it, and how can Muslims from the various backgrounds making up this *ummah* help write about the Ottoman past? I believe that, by beginning to do so, we can attain a more rounded and layered understanding of the Islam within Ottoman studies that has been fundamentally marginalized. While there are indeed numerous scholars

⁹ Sardar, *The Future of Muslim Civilization*, pp. 180-207.

¹⁰ I would like to thank Humza Azam Gondal for his insights and contribution to the writing of this essay.

who write about the various Islamic aspects of Ottoman history, I would like more Muslims to take part in writing and understanding it. Much like the rest of the history of Islamic civilization, our engagement with the Ottoman past needs to be a continuous dialectic conversation among Muslims throughout the world.

As a lecturer of history in a theology department, I can safely say that a collective amnesia has set in the minds of Muslims regarding the last Caliphate of the Muslim world, a Muslim dynasty that ruled provinces across three continents until the early twentieth century. History as a vocation is not a priority for many students who study Shariah or Islamic studies, even though much of what they study is indeed interconnected with the Islamic past. Additionally, one can imagine the lack of investment in the study of history by students pursuing fields such as the sciences, engineering, and even political science. History, which was perceived as a vocation that created intellectuals and thinkers in Western societies, was also part of the Islamic educational curricula as many works on Islamic history used to be written by the *ulema*. However, in both the West and Muslim circles, there tends to be a tendency to study the sciences, technology, and business over the humanities, with even fewer Muslims perceiving the humanities as a suitable career option, as most lifestyle choices are based on practical concerns of how to attain a sustainable income. However, while that may be the case in the academy, there has been an increase in the number of Muslims wanting to know more about the Ottoman past, which suggests that things are not all doom and gloom.¹¹

The reason why the writing of history is important, however, is that Muslims may lose agency and control over the way their past is told. Rather than coming from a position of owning their identity, tradition, and past, instead their identity, traditions and past will become dictated to them. The amnesia will lead to a host of untruths of the past, but furthermore will create disjointed breaks regarding the tradition. If Islam is to be categorized as a discursive tradition,¹² then any changes regarding the narratives of key milestones impacts the way that we view ourselves

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<https://www.jamesgmartin.center/2018/09/why-humanities-programs-suffer-as-the-humanities-themselves-do-great/>

¹² Ovamir Anjum, 'Islam as a Discursive Tradition: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors,' In *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Duke University Press, Volume 27, Number 3, 2007, pp. 656-672.

today. This point is important when examining the Ottoman past, as six centuries of history of Muslims, in Europe, Asia Minor, and North Africa are either forgotten or misunderstood. The Ottoman world was multi-ethnic, a world in which the Islamic tradition, in conjunction with the various Islamic authorities, evolved, changed, and reformed over time. In particular, understanding how Islam, the Shariah, the evolution of the Islamic sciences and more importantly authority functioned is important in recognizing whether the Ottomans had, in fact, started to move away from the Islamic tradition. As stressed, if Islam is indeed a discursive tradition, then our learning of Islam surely should not end after the collapse of the Abassids, and in fact should at least continue until the end of the Ottomans in 1342/1924 when a host of Islamic institutional structures still existed. Thus, while practical concerns are indeed important when life choices are being made, it is imperative however that in the community there is a culture that supports the study of intellectual discourse, as the community's identity depends on it.

I have often been asked by Muslims why should Ottoman history matter. While I understand such a question, it is my opinion that the premise of the question is incorrect. The Islamic past is not race-, time-, or geography-specific. Our intention is to establish as Muslims what we can learn from our past as a collective and where mistakes were made. It is about understanding the context and narrative so that we may, as a collective, take meaning from them. The fact that so much of today's Islamic revivalist discourse has emerged from the Ottoman past should indicate to us that we are still invested in the actions of the past and that they continue to impact our lives today.

It wasn't only Ibn Khaldun who stressed the importance of the study of history within the Muslim community; the famous Muslim thinker Mohammad Iqbal¹³ made the same case and, more recently, on a trip to Malaysia I heard in a presentation by the Muslim scholar Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas that it is necessary for the Muslim community to produce scholars and thinkers who

¹³ Mohammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Ashraf, Lahore, 1971, pp. 147-8.

produce works on Islamic history as this is as much about the existence of Islam in the minds of Muslims as it is simply a scholarly endeavor.

There are two main ways in which Muslims learn about the Ottoman past. The first is from works produced in academia and the second are works written in Muslim seminaries, often written by the *ulema*, who include imams, preachers, and so forth. By and large, most of the investment regarding Ottoman history comes from either Western academia or Turkish academia, which has meant that, within seminary circles, Ottoman studies still continues to lack a space in which it can be taught appropriately. This is even more concerning because the Ottomans existed for six hundred years and were a Caliphate for at least four hundred, during which time there was much knowledge production. This, at times, has facilitated a wedge between Muslims who study Ottoman history in Western academia and those who study in Muslim seminaries. It is imperative in my view that we attempt to bridge this gap. Over time, I have come to notice that, when talking about the immediate past, the *ulema* either no longer feel comfortable or don't have the specialized skills to address the ideologically driven narratives that are being presented in the books of Western academia or the Western media. I do not blame the *ulema* for this oversight as I recognize that in the era of specialization that Ottoman history may not be of priority over other subject areas. While the *ulema* may have forsaken the writing of Ottoman studies, it can equally be stressed that Western academia reflects what Mansoor calls 'secular consciousness' when viewing the Islamic past.

A recent phenomenon, mainly due to Turkish TV shows, has seen a relative increase in seminarians giving talks and tours on the Ottomans. However, while it is welcome that talks, lectures, and tours are undertaken by sincere scholars of religion as a way of maintaining a link to our past, tradition, and heritage, very little practice is undertaken in the way of archival research, scrutiny of secondary literature, or the problems of narrative construction. Some may say that these things are not important for most people who want to learn about the past, which I understand, as most Muslims simply want to gain knowledge in any given subject and do not wish to scrutinize dates, data, and ideologically driven narratives. However, the same cannot be said about the one who is the agent of providing the

information. If we are thorough about early Islamic history, then I would request that the same level of care and diligence is taken regarding Ottoman history. I hear the community when they say that most academics tend to have difficulties engaging a Muslim audience. Nonetheless, while that may be the case for some, by and large as a community we need to work together to find cohesive ways of making our past relevant to the present and the future.

When history is taught either as a set of dates, overcomplicated data, or narratives of a glorified past, I can understand why many choose to not engage with it. When history is taught in this manner, there is no doubting that most end up bored, before a class is even taught. It can then come as no surprise that Turkish TV shows on Ottoman history such as *Diriliş Ertuğrul* and *Payitaht Abdülhamid* have become popular, not only with my students in the classroom, but worldwide. But fundamentally what I have learnt is that students and people are mainly engaged with history when they start to appreciate why it should matter to them. And it is my hope that I can explain why it should.

The challenges of ideology, narrative, and language

With academia leading the way regarding the writing of the Ottoman past, it is important to understand what is being done so that Muslims can study Ottoman history from their own worldview. There are three main issues that we must take into consideration when examining the Ottoman past. Before even looking at specific events, which is how Muslims have usually chosen to study history, it is important to view three main issues that are far more important: ideology, narrative, and language.¹⁴ As thinkers such as Parvez Mansoor, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Ziauddin Sarder have suggested, ideology or worldview is important in the way Islamic history is studied. In particular, I would stress that Ottoman history primarily has been viewed from Orientalist or nation-state

¹⁴ I would like to thank Dr Burcin Kagan Mustafa a lecturer at Princess Nourah University, Riyadh, and a graduate of the School of Oriental and African studies for his conversations on these points.

perspectives that framed the Ottoman past within an ideological paradigm.¹⁵ Orientalism was one of the most divisive tools used in Western academia to shape and frame particular narratives of the Ottoman past—narratives that continue to resonate in the Western press and some academic circles until today.¹⁶ While some academics have chosen to revise some of the narratives that emerged from the ideological paradigms of writing the Ottoman past, these were still perceived as internal criticisms within the larger framework of the ideology.¹⁷ When teaching many of my international Muslim students, it continues to surprise me that, while many of them have read the works of Edward Said, they nonetheless choose not to apply his criticisms to the field of Ottoman studies. It may be, as Wael Hallaq has recently stressed, that maybe Said didn't go far enough in his criticism of Orientalism. Or maybe, as Hallaq has implied, Said was working within the same ideological paradigm.¹⁸

Thus, ideology often facilitates narrative construction. Narrative construction is to some degree the fluid intellectual machinery that creates a theme where narrative does not require a dominant argument, nor gains dominance by the strength of the argument, but rather it is a series of claims repeated over and over by power. In the case of the Ottomans, it was Western academia and the nation-states who asserted this power. While not as restrictive as, say, ideology, narrative construction is, however, an equally powerful tool of creating perceptions of people and their value systems, where very little scrutiny is undertaken to check its validity. What is necessary to ask is: where is the truth in the narrative? In particular, Orientalist discourse has done much to create a narrative of Muslims and Islam that has become so deeply entrenched that it is rarely questioned. In the Ottoman case, narratives of Ottoman decline, Westernization,¹⁹ and secularism²⁰ require further attention within Muslim circles, as these narratives collectively consolidated the

¹⁵ Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*. (London: Oxford U.P., 1961); Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Yusuf Hikmet Bayur, *Türk İnkılâbı Tarihi*, Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları (İstanbul: Maarif Matbaası, 1940).

¹⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London, Penguin Books, 2003).

¹⁷ Cameron Michael Amin, Benjamin C. Fortna, And Elizabeth B. Frierson, *The Modern Middle East- A Sourcebook of History*, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp.viii-xi.

¹⁸ Wael Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*, (Columbia University Press, 2018).

¹⁹ Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*.

²⁰ Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*.

notion that Islam had been lacking within the Ottomans domains throughout their history, a notion that has only recently started to be robustly questioned within Western academic spaces.²¹

It is fair to argue that, while there is considerable academic debate regarding many of the above-mentioned narratives, this type of vigor has yet to be seen within Muslim circles, especially as collectively these narratives created a larger meta-narrative that questions Islam's place and contribution in the world for the last six hundred years and has successfully left behind a host of ingrained assumptions. Unpacking such narratives will be a long drawn-out process that requires much investment from Muslims worldwide. What is required first, however, is for Muslim students to understand what the prior narratives were and how they are being challenged to understand how they place themselves within both the ideologically driven narratives and the subsequent responses to them.

Thus, the fluidity of narratives, unlike ideology, has meant that meta-theories are created but hardly questioned as a series of dots are created usually in a teleological fashion to consolidate a point. It is required that Muslims write their own narratives, from their own perspective and worldview; as Mahmut Mutman has suggested, there is a politics to writing about Islam that has considerably shifted since the age of colonialism in which much Muslim agency has been lost, of which it is worth asking as Mutman has: who is writing for Islam?²² The obvious answer should be Muslims not simply as Muslims but from their Islamic worldview; but Muslim engagement is still lacking in re-claiming their own narratives. What is important to stress is how narrative is given much agency due to language and the coining of terms, which brings me to my third and final point: that language matters.

²¹ On the challenge to the theory of Ottoman Westernization see Frederick F. Anscombe, *State, Faith, and Nation in Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Lands* (New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2014); on the idea of Ottoman modernity, see Olivier Bouquet, *Is It Time to Stop Speaking about Ottoman Modernisation? Order and Compromise: Government Practices in Turkey from the Late Ottoman Empire to Early 21st Century*, 2015, 45; and on the idea of Ottoman decline, see Cemal Kafadar, *The Question of Ottoman Decline*, Harvard Middle East and Islamic Review, 1999.

²² Mahmut Mutman, *The Politics of Writing Islam: Voicing Difference* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 1-7.

In regards to Ottoman studies, the importance of language falls into two main categories. The first is the need to learn languages in order to be able to read the primary texts and the second and more significant point is how terms are created and used to explain Muslim experiences, which I shall explain.

Dependency on reading and writing in English has led to the challenges of translations into English that have reduced Muslim communities to read in a medium that at times is unable to provide adequate meaning to the Islamic and/or Muslim experience. One of the biggest challenges regarding Ottoman studies is the need to study a multiplicity of languages that include Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, and Persian as official Islamicate languages and then other possible languages that include Greek, Albanian, Ladino, French, and even German. The challenges for the translator is that translation requires either literal translations which lose meaning, or implied meaning which means that the translator needs to have not only a grasp of language skills but also cultural nuances in order to best explain what the original author intended. This often leaves the original text dependent on the translator who may view any given text within a particular ideological paradigm, as no translation is devoid of this. There is no doubting that the biggest challenge regarding language to the Ottoman historian has been the loss of Ottoman Turkish as a practiced language. The invisibility of the language has made the Ottoman world somewhat invisible to many of us today.

Language, however, is not simply a tool for conveying meaning; it is part of ideology and, to some degree, the dominance of history writing in the English medium has facilitated the learning of Ottoman history within the purview of Western interests, Western forms of expression, and Western terminology as narratives are constructed by how words are used. For example when the Ottoman sultans were deemed Oriental despots, this inspires negative connotations of the Ottoman form of governance. Even today, when the term Sultan is used in the Western press, one pictures a despotic Islamic past. A term such as Hamidian²³ 'regime' rather than Hamidian 'government' is an example of how subtle changes

²³ Hamidian is the term used to depict the governance of Sultan Abdulhamid II.

in words can impact the way a narrative is told. This suggests that Islam was often depicted in a language that presented Islam and its adherents as the ‘Other.’

In that sense, Muslim self-expression requires some investigation. An example is when in the nineteenth century when Muslims used words such as *ittihad-i Islam*, which reflected ideas of Muslim/Islamic unity, it was unhelpfully translated as Pan-Islamism, a term coined and used in the West. Pan-Islamism, later to become Islamism, failed to capture how the notion of Muslim unity was not merely an instrumentalization of Islam for political objectives. It thus needs to be stressed that our Islamicate indigenous languages matter, as English translations of terms and words that reflect Muslims experiences may not be helpful in understanding how Muslims viewed themselves. An example would be that if the word *dawah* was translated as Muslim missionary activity, it would surely be a grave injustice to what the term *dawah* actually means. It is for this reason important to note that terms describing Muslim experiences do not carry over well in English at times but English has become an authoritative instrument for promoting orientalist positions regarding Ottoman experiences. As a result, the learning of multiple languages, especially Ottoman Turkish, requires investment if we are to develop a better understanding of the Ottoman past.

I would argue that Islamicate languages continue to translate a lot smoother than translations into English. In that sense words in Farsi or say Malay have very little if anything lost in translation from the original Arabic content. This can also be said about Ottoman Turkish. This is due to the fact that Islam was infused in the Islamicate languages. Languages such as English and French have yet to replicate this type of smoothness, suggesting not all translations are the same and that some languages (mainly the Islamicate) maintain an integrity in translation that other languages (mainly English) do not. In fairness, the English language has done much to maintain Islamic ideas as more and more Muslims write in English, but words continue to hold their value only when English embraces them not translates them.

To some degree, the Ottomans fall into what Salman Sayyid has categorized the ‘West’ versus ‘the rest’ narrative in which the world continues to be lumped into two main categories: that which is perceived as belonging to so-called Western norms, values, and traditions and then everybody else.²⁴ Very little distinction is made in understanding the nuanced differences between say the Ottomans and Iran, or Russia and nations to the south of the North African belt. Narratives and language are used together to perpetuate the view that the non-Western world was a homogenous block, as reflected in the pejorative generalization that represented all non-Western governance as ‘Oriental despotism.’ For the Ottomans, their interactions with all these entities, peoples, traditions, and cultures created a very complex culture of political and social configuration that was pluralistic and multifaceted. But, more importantly, it was done in a language that was part of its own worldview and narrative.

With these points in mind, I attempt to explain the periods in which Ottoman studies are studied, and the challenges that should be understood regarding the points mentioned previously.

So who are the Ottomans?

I am often asked who the Ottomans are and what makes one an Ottoman? Is it race, language, or religion? Such is the complexity of defining a multi-ethnic world under the stewardship of one dynasty. Nowadays, identity is a lot easier to determine: for example, one can say they are from Germany or from Japan or any other nation in the world which draws identity along lines of borders, language, and ethnicity. But increasing migration (through globalization) and territorial negation invite one to ask how communities configured identity and belonging prior to the emergence of the nation-state.

²⁴ Salman Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate: Decolonisation and the World Order* (C. Hurst & Co Publishers, London, 2014), pp. 1-7.

In West Asia, to suggest that one is an Arab or a Turk based on ethno-linguistic lines is also something we have become accustomed to. But what did it mean to be an Ottoman? What happened to that identity after the collapse of the Ottoman domains? The Ottoman dynasty existed for nearly six centuries—during which its own identity underwent constant reconfiguration and change. In contrast, an international system with far more stable borders and clear ideologies is very different and it is challenging for citizens of the latter to understand the ways in which people identified themselves prior to this arrangement.

It started in a small part of Anatolia

After the devastation of much of Asia and West Asia by the Mongol invasions, the Muslim world that had once been the center of learning, culture, and trade retained a shadow of its former glory. With the gradual decline of Mongol power, multiple Muslim principalities emerged, among which the Seljuks of Rum became the ruling power in the region of Western Asia known as Anatolia. The trauma of the collapse of *Dar al-Salaam* (Baghdad) dramatically reshaped the geopolitical configurations of the region. As a result, there was a period of interregnum with an unclear Caliphal authority. While the Abassid ‘state’ had collapsed, Islam remained within the culture, tradition, and peoples.

It was in the lands of the now-weakened Seljuk Sultanate of Rum that a small Turkic tribal people belonging to the Kayı tribe migrated westwards with peoples from various backgrounds to the frontier of the Byzantine Empire. It is from the Kayı tribe that the Ottoman dynasty emerged. Named after Osman Gazi, the first records of the Ottomans suggest that Osman probably died in 724/1324 after attempting to capture the city of Bursa. Very little is known about Osman but legend has it that he had seen a dream interpreted by his Sheikh Edebali in which a tree of light had grown from his chest with many leaves and branches, indicating that his progeny would rule over the region for centuries to come. Whether this

legend is true or not, the progeny of Osman did indeed become heirs to one of the most powerful Islamic states in the history of Islam.²⁵

The emergence of the Ottomans as a regional *beylik*/emirate however happened under Orhan Gazi, the son of Osman, who consolidated the House of Osman as a power in the region by opening Bursa and establishing it as the first capital city of the Ottoman domains in 726/1326. Juxtaposed between the Seljuks to the East and a Byzantine Empire in crisis in the West, the Ottomans gradually emerged as an expanding *beylik* in the region that acted as a buffer between the Christian and Muslim worlds.²⁶

Early Ottoman narratives by academics attempted to present Ottoman expansion in relation to what came to be known as ‘the Gazi thesis’ in which the early Ottomans were seen as being inspired by the goal of conquest to spread Islam.²⁷ However, some academics attempted to challenge this thesis by suggesting that it wasn’t Islam that had inspired the early Ottomans but instead the quest for booty and the rewards that they bought with them.²⁸ As a result, these academics argued about the possibility of the early Ottomans not being Muslims at all and only later converting. Unable to make the links between the Turkic *beyliks* and the Seljuks in the region, much academic endeavor has gone into whether the early Ottomans were indeed Muslim or not. The contention comes from the fact that we know very little regarding Osman Gazi or his predecessors as the tribal peoples of Anatolia documented very little in this period. What we do have information on are coins minted in the name of Orhan, as well as mosques and tombs that were constructed during his reign. However, what has often been missing in these narratives is the role of the *ulema* as too much emphasis is placed simply on the warrior. However, recent studies indicate that the early Ottomans were indeed aware of their Islamic

²⁵ Caroline Finkle, *Osman's Dream: The Story of the Ottoman Empire 1300-1923* (John Murrey Publishers, London), 2006, p. 42.

²⁶ Halil İnalcık, *Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age, 1300-1600*, London, 1973, pp. 3-9.

²⁷ Paul Wittek, *The Rise of the Ottoman Empire: Studies in the History of Turkey, Thirteenth-Fifteenth Centuries* (Routledge, London, 2012).

²⁸ Heath Lowry, *The Nature of the Early Ottoman State* (State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 43-56.

identity and their cultivation of early institutions based on Islam do not look as haphazard as some earlier Ottoman historians have portrayed.²⁹

This early period of Ottoman history is quite similar to what we are experiencing today: a period in which Muslim “states” attempted to implement a nominal Shariah-based political system, but still worked outside the remit of the theological position of the Caliphate model (although it must be stressed that the Abassid Caliph did nominally exist in Egypt). The question thus remains: what was the end goal of the early Ottoman *beylik*? It would be fair to suggest that whether it be the Umayyads, Abbasids, or the Ottomans, that the inception of the dynasty was a fluid one in which consolidation of power only occurred later. But in Muslim consciousness, the inception of any political entity has become important. Even today’s nation-states require a moment in which the state was first established. The question for us is: why is this important? Especially as it was probably Orhan who established the Ottoman dynasty, not his father. Thus, it should be the study of Orhan that requires greater investment as it was during his reign that we start to see the formulation of an entity that attempted to call itself Ottoman. But it must be stressed that the notion of being Ottoman was not static as an identity marker and that people in the earlier period would not have called themselves Ottomans until much later, as the notion of citizenship did not exist.

The conquest of Constantinople/Istanbul

After a small spell of internal strife, the Ottoman *beylik* was significantly weakened due to the conflict between the Ottoman Sultan “Yıldırım” Beyazıt (the Thunderbolt) and the formidable Mongol-Turkic leader Timurlane over Anatolia. This led to an internal civil war between the princes of the dynasty and it wasn’t until the rise of Sultan Mehmet Fatih, the eventual conqueror of Constantinople/Istanbul in 857/1453, that the Ottomans became a regional power. Beyazıt was the first of the Ottomans to lay siege to Istanbul and advance into the Balkans.

²⁹ Abdulrahman Atçıl, *Scholars and Sultans in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 17-40.

Constantinople was now the target but it required a charismatic sultan who could attempt to conquer Istanbul again and then unify the fractured Anatolian provinces. Fatih Sultan Mehmet was that sultan. Following a fifty-seven-day siege, Fatih attempted the audacious tactic of taking the lighter fleet of ships over land to avoid the Byzantine boom chain (naval barrier) that was blocking his ships from going through the Bosphorus straits and laying siege to the city from behind with his cannons. It has to be said that this was an extraordinary feat. Istanbul had now come into the hands of the Muslims, the Christian church Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque, and a gradual program of encouraging inhabitants of the Balkans who had skills to live in the city was implemented.³⁰ As mentioned, before the conquest of the Byzantine capital, the Ottomans had already made a series of conquests in the Balkans with both Beyazit and Fatih being born in Edirne, the second capital city of the Ottoman domains, bringing Islam to the Balkans and the frontiers of Europe. Mehmet Fatih would later again attempt to centralize Anatolia when the Ottomans had become an established entity in the region.³¹

From its inception, the Ottoman *beylik* had already been a multi-ethnic, multi-religious domain. Under Fatih, however, the Ottomans became a ruling power in the region, taking Constantinople (which would be renamed Istanbul). In doing so, Fatih fulfilled the prophecy narrated in the *hadith* of the Prophet ﷺ by becoming the great Muslim leader to conquer the city.³² Following the conquest, Fatih took great care to maintain the culture and traditions of one of the most significant cities in Christendom. He managed to incorporate much of the skills, workers, and peoples of the Christian Byzantine Empire and encouraged a program of social cohesion between the majority non-Muslim inhabitants of Istanbul and the Balkans with the new Muslim authority and peoples who were converting to Islam.

³⁰ Finkle, *Osman's Dream*, p. 118.

³¹ Halil İnalcık, 'Mehmed the Conqueror (1432-1481) and his Time,' in *H. İnalcık, Essays in Ottoman History, Istanbul* (1998) 87-109 (Speculum XXXV (1960)).

³² "Verily you shall conquer Constantinople. What a wonderful leader he will be, and what a wonderful army will that be!" Narrated from Bishir al-Khath'ami or al-Ghanawi by: Ahmad, *al Musnad* 14:331.

Mosques and *madrassas* started to become a feature of the Istanbul skyline as Muslims congregated in the places of worship that shaped their lives. As the places of worship became integral to life in the Ottoman domains, so too did the *ulema* become an important bureaucratic force within the imperial politics of the new Ottoman world.³³ It was the conquest of Istanbul that facilitated the embracing of Byzantine practices as the Topkapı palace was built, along with the controversial culture of eunuchs becoming part of the Ottoman political culture. The most controversial issue regarding the early Ottomans has been the practice of fratricide in which the protection of the *devlet/dawla* (state)³⁴ was seen as paramount to the safeguarding of Islam; thus, the concept of *din*³⁵ *ü devlet* indicating that both Islam and the state were inseparable. Furthermore, apart from the conquest of Istanbul, students tend to focus very little on the institutionalization of practices during Fatih's reign; the role of the Shariah, the Kanun, and knowledge production requires further study within Muslim circles.³⁶

Very little attention is given to Islam and the Balkans; yet Albanians, Bosnians, and many other Muslim groups became part of the landscape of Europe, due to the Ottoman endeavor. This was not the first time that Islam was part of Europe, but unlike the Umayyads of Spain we continue to have Muslim groups in the region who deserve better attention regarding their history.

The most significant point of this period is that Islam as a political entity was brought back to Europe after the Muslims were forced out of Spain. Albanians and Bosnians as well as other Muslim groups had become Muslim due to the Ottomans. Islam in the Balkans was an Ottoman effort. But Fatih's reign was not without controversy. The concept of fratricide was introduced in an attempt to safeguard the *devlet* over the ambitions of a brother from the Ottoman household. While

³³ Atçıl, *Scholars and Sultans in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, pp. 59-100.

³⁴ Here when I mention *devlet* or state I do not mean what modern conceptions represent but rather the Ottoman configurations of the various power groups that reflected that the House of Osman was the main dynastical power that represented the Caliphate. It must be stressed that throughout Ottoman history 'the state' was a fluid entity that transformed as political configurations evolved.

³⁵ I use the word *din* (deen) here as meaning worldview rather than religion as this is how it was understood in the Ottoman world.

³⁶ Ibid.

ulema in the past had legitimized such a practice, more contemporary positions have become far more critical regarding the legitimizing of murder, let alone that of a family member. This was not simply an Ottoman practice, however, as the Sasanians, Byzantines, and Muslims of Spain also engaged in such practices. There were a host of reasons for fratricide and to assume that every situation was the same is simplistic. Some instances were due to internal revolts, others for colluding with the enemy, nonetheless the issue of legitimacy that was not aptly formulated, provided a caveat for the killing of a brother who challenged the leadership of the community. This matter requires further research as *fetwa* culture is diverse and robust for positions for and against.

The Ottomans as a Caliphate

It is due to Fatih's conquests that we can truly call the Ottomans a dynasty but it wasn't until the coming to the throne of Yavuz (the Grim) Sultan Selim I, in 917/1512 that the Ottomans laid claim to the Caliphate. Selim came to the throne in conditions that can be described as civil strife, but nevertheless expanded the Ottoman domains by defeating the Turkic Mamluk rulers of *Balad al-Sham* and Egypt in 922/1517. Legend has it that in Cairo the last Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil gave the keys of Mecca to Selim as it is alleged that *beyah* (oath of allegiance) was given to him as the first Turk to become Caliph.³⁷ Whether or not this is true, there was no disputing that the Ottomans from this moment onwards became *Khadim al-Haramayn* (Custodians of the two Harams—Mecca and Medina) as well as becoming custodians of the Christian Holy sites in Bethlehem and al-Quds, which also lent weight to their claims as successors to the Byzantines.

Under his son, Kanuni (the Law Giver) Sultan Suleyman, the Ottoman domains were at their largest, encompassing areas that include today's Algeria, the Crimea, Iraq, and much of the Balkans. Many historians have called this period of Ottoman history a 'golden age,' a point now challenged.³⁸ The Ottoman domains at this

³⁷ Selâhattin Tansel, *Yavuz Sultan Selim*, (Ankara, 1969), pp. 118-120; see also Hüseyin Yılmaz, *Caliphate Redefined – The Mystical Turn in Ottoman Political Thought*, (Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 21-64.

³⁸ Finkle, *Osman's Dream*, p. 280.

point were a rich conglomerate of peoples of many backgrounds, religions, and linguistic groupings.

Along with the nominal existence of the Abassids in Cairo under Mamluk rule and inspired by the works of *ulema* such as al-Mawardi, al-Baqillani, and al-Ghazali, writings of the medieval period managed to maintain the memory of the idea of the Caliphate as an institution in Islam that the Ottomans eventually implemented. The question is why? Some academics have argued that the narratives of Selim becoming Caliph were re-written by Ottoman writers later on in their history as challenges to the Caliphate started to resurface within Arab and British circles. While some scholars have questioned whether the Ottomans actually saw themselves as Caliphs or not in this period, it is worth examining whether the Ottomans fulfilled the conditions of the works that they had been inspired by. I would stress that there is enough evidence that the Ottomans took seriously the claim of being Caliphs well before the nineteenth century, suggesting that the memory of the institution of the Caliphate was intrinsic to Islamic political theory in which the Ottoman *ulema* must have had a strong hand. It must be stressed, however, as Hüseyn Yılmaz has pointed out, that the collapse of the Abbasids was still fresh in the minds of the Ottoman world. Furthermore, with a host of religious works being written on the nature of good Islamic governance, this naturally lent towards the ideas of the Caliphate.³⁹

In the Ottoman domains, non-Muslims probably still continued to outnumber Muslims but, up until this period, the notion of expansion and conquest was still very much of the Ottoman world-view. Monumental projects such as mosques, *madrassa* expansion, the institutionalization of the *ilmiye* and the Janissary corps and the multiple Sufi *tariqats* had become part of the Ottoman Islamic world; this period of Ottoman history can be termed the Second Empire.⁴⁰ Mimar (The Architect) Sinan had become one of the most famous architects in Islamic history, building projects all over the Ottoman domains, even inspiring Muslims in other

³⁹ Yılmaz, *Caliphate Redefined*, pp. 64-107.

⁴⁰ Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformations in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

parts of the Muslim world as distinct Ottoman architectural features were established. The Ottomans were a military power unrivalled as the strength of the three Muslim powers, the Ottomans, Safavids and Mughals (also known as the 'Gunpowder Empires') was based on their military expertise and innovation. Along with an Islamic worldview, institutional building was attributed to political strength, statecraft, military innovation, and policies of taxation. Wars were an accepted feature of the Ottoman world and military strength and reformation gave the Ottomans a distinct identity.

It wasn't simply the military that became institutionalized, as the *ulema* also equally became a significant institutionalized group of both learning and talking truth to power. Cities such as Cairo, Damascus, Kerbela, Baghdad, Al-Quds, Mecca, and Medina, as well as Tripoli and Tunis had now become part of the domains that had Konya, Bursa, Kosovo, Salonika, and Istanbul indicating the numerous centers of Islamic learning in one domain. It is understandable why this period in Ottoman history is referred to by historians and Muslim scholars alike as a golden age. It also indicates that even Muslims determine success on the basis of power, inviting us to ask if the way we feel about our Islamic past is as much an evaluation of how we imagine Islam and power and the place we see ourselves in the world today.

It was during the reign of Sulayman that the *kanun* started to become institutionalized. The *kanun*, wrongly described as secular law, was a law established probably during the reign of Fatih which supplemented the Shariah regarding matters to do with administration. Practical concessions were made by arguing that *Örf* (custom) should be taken into consideration in matters that didn't contradict the Shariah. This was to be regulated by the *ulema*, and consisted of laws that provided the Sultan some level of authority in matters to do with the state administration, especially in a time when the state administration was increasing in size. There has been much discussion regarding the notion of the *kanun* being secular and these debates once again require further study from Muslims in order to establish how the *kanun* and the Shariah were implemented and became part of the Ottoman legal structure.

Orientalist historians have perpetuated an assumption that Sultanate authority was authoritarian in nature, conveyed through the notion of 'Oriental despotism.' On the contrary, closer inspection indicates that the Sultan was not the absolutist that many have suggested. The *ulema*, Janissary corps, and local magnates all managed to be part of the political power sharing culture that emerged in the Ottoman domains.⁴¹ In particular, the Janissaries, an institution that attained much success during the height of Ottoman political expansion, had now become an integral internal check on Sultanate power.

However, as a result of the internal contestations of power between the various factions that had served the Ottomans so well, these same institutions would be perceived as hindering the Ottomans in comparison to the aggressive colonial expansions the European powers had begun to engage in around the world. Internal revolts, the rise of Muslim movements such as the Kadızadeli in Istanbul, and later the Wahhabis in the Hijaz, would create new challenges and the need for military and economic reform would become apparent. However, the de-centralized configuration of power in the Ottoman domains made it difficult to extract the resources for much-needed changes to compete with the Russian and European powers.

The Janissaries, who were seen as a traditional constitutional check on Sultanate absolutism, had themselves begun to inhibit the functioning of the government by compromising the role of the sultan and dethroning sultans who did not support their interests.⁴² Much of Ottoman political culture emerged from the idea of the 'Circle of Justice'⁴³ and the House of Osman became the main body of authority accepted by all other authorities as a way of dissuading alternative contestations to central authority by any other internal Muslim power group as had happened

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 191-226.

⁴² Hüseyin Yılmaz, "Containing Sultanate Authority: Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire before Modernity." *Osmanlı Araştırmaları/The Journal of Ottoman Studies*, no XLV (2015).

⁴³ The term "Circle of Justice" was coined by the sixteenth-century Ottoman thinker and scholar Kinalizade. It described the relationship between state and society prior to the nineteenth century. For more information see Linda Darling, "Circle of Justice" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, THREE, Consulted online on 6 January 2019.

during the earlier interregnum periods of Ottoman rule in which Muslim principalities were going to war with one another.

A series of defeats—Indication of a decline?

Thus, the next century witnessed much internal conflict and contestation in Istanbul with the turnover of sultans and indeed young sultans created much political instability as the Janissary attained influence in Istanbul and the magnates consolidated authority in their localities.⁴⁴ The decentralized domains were creating problems of rulership for the Ottomans as the domains became internally embroiled while the more centralized the European powers became, the more efficient in both military strength and expansion they became. European powers were colonizing much of the world, not only due to their more modern weapons, although that was a factor, but more significantly due to the level of aggression they were willing to use to achieve their objectives. If the European world was going through a period of Enlightenment, it was equally displaying forms of violence that fractured many societies in their wake. The collapse of the other two Muslim 'gun powder' powers, the Safavid and Mughals, left the Ottomans as the only real Muslim power that could resist the European race for the resources of the rest of the world. The Ottoman domains clearly needed to find a way to, on the one hand, improve its military to be able to resist and even compete with the European powers and, on the other, adhere to the Islamic principles of warfare, just governance, and political competency.

In 1187/1774, the Ottomans under Sultan Abdülhamid I for the first time lost a major Muslim area, the Khanate of Crimea, to the Russians. The terms of the peace treaty known as Küçük Kaynarca were unfavorable to the Muslims, with the exception that the Muslims allow Istanbul to elect the Mufti and be recognized as a Caliphate that still continued to have a vested interest in the affairs of the Muslims there. For the first time, the Ottomans lost domains in which Muslims were

⁴⁴ Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire*, pp. 115-184.

previously under their protection which, also for the first time, forced the Ottomans to re-examine the role of the Caliph in the protection of the *ummah*.⁴⁵

It was always understood that the *ummah* was split within two main spheres, those in the domains and those outside of the Ottoman domains such as India, China, Russia, Iran, and Africa. The Ottomans knew that they could not offer much protection to the Muslims outside of their domains but the loss of the Crimea made the Ottomans realize that there was now a third category: Muslims who used to be part of the domains but now were not. This period became a period of mass Muslim migration to Anatolia, which intensified the discussions in the imperial center of the need to centralize as a way to compete with the outside empires. It also contributed to debates on the role of the Caliphate in the global Muslim *ummah* and whether the Sultan as Caliph should use soft power or hard power policies in attaining the loyalty of Muslims outside the Ottoman domains.⁴⁶ This also raised questions of legitimacy and questions of what should be the policy towards Muslims in areas like India, Russia, and Africa that were facing much persecution at the hands of various colonial powers. With a military still unable to compete with the European powers, even if the Ottomans wanted to they could not risk war with the European powers.

Also, this is the period in Ottoman history that was eventually labeled the period of Ottoman decline. It has been argued by historians that the weakening of Ottoman domains was the main reason why the Ottomans allowed Western ideas and thoughts to dominate their understanding of Islam. Many revisionist historians now argue that, in fact, this was a form of narrative construction that had no basis that was any different regarding the earlier periods of Ottoman history, as a thorough examination of Ottoman institutional reformation is required.⁴⁷ This is not to say there wasn't a decline or that there was, but simply to stress the point that Muslims outside of academia have yet to contribute to this debate within Muslim circles as

⁴⁵ S. Tufan Buzpinar, 'The Question of Caliphate under the Last Ottoman Sultans' in *Ottoman Reform and Muslim Regeneration* (I.B Taurus, London, 2005), pp. 17-20.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 20-25.

⁴⁷ Dana Sajdi, 'Decline, its Discontents and Ottoman Cultural History: By Way of Introduction' in *Ottoman Tulips, Ottoman Coffee: Leisure and Lifestyle in the Eighteenth Century* (I. B. Tauris, London, 2014), pp. 1-40.

the 'decline narrative' becomes heavily contested in academic circles just as it was created in the corridors of the Western powers.⁴⁸

But what should we have expected from the Ottomans in order to not be seen as a declined entity? What is indeed the criterion of comparison? Should the Ottoman period be compared to the period that came before? In many ways, the age of Sulayman was known as a 'Golden Period.' The period of Sulayman, however, also involved much bloodshed; Sulayman even had his son and Grand Vizier killed. So what are the parameters of a Golden period and those of decline? The notion of decline is one of how we view ourselves and that is a question that requires further scrutiny. Should the Ottoman powers have been compared to Western powers? The parameters of both entities were different. While it is true that the Western powers were gaining much success in terms of expansion, with that came a tremendous amount of violence, death, and destruction, which the Ottomans could not have replicated due to the culture of Islam, as well as legal and political culture. In many ways, while Muslims do indeed have a right to question decisions made by Ottoman thinkers in this period, very little solution-based discussion exists.

Ottoman modernity—The so-called long nineteenth century

A series of reform proposals were being considered by the palace in the wake of a series of defeats of which military reformation was perceived as a must. It was decided to create a new army known as the *Nizam el-Cedid/Nitham al-Jadid*, which was supposed to be better at learning the new military techniques employed by the European powers, but within an Islamic framework.⁴⁹ In 1212/1798,

⁴⁸ A Muslim response on Ottoman decline can be seen in the ideas, for example, of the likes of Abul Hassan al-Nadwi who examines the crises of Muslim civilization and the paths to revival. Revivalism requires decline which is a evident theme within works of Muslim writers. See in *Islam and the World: The Rise and Decline of Muslims and its Effects on Mankind* Trans by Mohammed Assif UK: UK Islamic Academy of Islamic Research and Publications, 2005.

⁴⁹ Ali Yaycioğlu, *Partners of the Empire – The Crises of the Ottoman Order in the Age of Revolutions* (Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. 38-64.

Napoleon invaded Egypt, sending shockwaves through the Ottoman world. It took an ambitious soldier by the name of Mehmet Ali/Muhammad Ali Pasha from Kavala to expel the French forces in 1215/1801 and later to crush the local Mamluks and establish his rule as a viceroy to the Ottomans. As part of the Ottoman domains since 922/1517, it was unthinkable to lose Egypt to the French.⁵⁰ In Istanbul, the Janissaries perceived the attempts to create a new army unit as a threat to them as an institution and, after an internal struggle between the Janissaries and the palace, Sultan Mahmud II finally came to the throne with the support of a strongman magnate. At the same time, civil unrest in Greece and the Hijaz required Mehmet Ali to use his troops to crush the internal rebellions, and soon after Mehmet Ali Pasha would conquer Sudan and conscript the peasantry into his new military.⁵¹

In Istanbul, Mahmud II mounted an aggressive centralization campaign in order to rapidly bring the military up to speed and be able to control it and the economy; all local magnates were eliminated, with the Janissaries finally being brutally dissolved in 1246/1831. It is during this period that historians argued that “modernity had truly become consolidated within the Ottoman domains.”⁵² Both Mehmet Ali Pasha and Sultan Mahmud II became known as ‘autocratic’ modernizers. It’s still worth investigating whether both were indeed absolutists; however, what can’t be denied is that centralization allowed for rapid decision-making, the consolidation of tax revenues, and the minimization of internal contestation from multiple actors, which no doubt facilitated a quicker reformation process that had been bogged down during the previous century due to the laborious mechanism decentralization represented.

But the Sultan’s policies perceived as aggressive and counter to Islam were now challenged by his loyal servant Mehmet Ali Pasha of Egypt. A discourse erupted regarding the nature of Islamic governance, with one camp insisting on absolute

⁵⁰ Khaled Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cairo, The American University of Cairo Press, 2002), pp. 1-40.

⁵¹ Frederick F. Anscombe, *State, Faith, and Nation in Ottoman and Post Ottoman Lands* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 61-90.

⁵² For a response to this debate, see *Ibid.*, pp. 83-87.

loyalty to the imam and the other arguing for a *Şura/Shura* based system with more decision-makers. Mehmet Ali marched from Egypt, occupying *Balad al Sham* and parts of the Hijaz for 8 years, eventually waiting for the Sultan in Anatolia, sending telegram after telegram advising the Sultan to stop his aggressive centralization policies. The Sultan, out of desperation, turned to the Russians and then the European powers in a vain attempt to stop the Egyptian Pasha. It was now not the fear of outside intervention that concerned the Ottoman center but instead a head-to-head between the two most powerful men of the Ottoman domains that had brought the Ottoman world to its knees. In 1254/1839, after the fortuitous death of Mahmud II and the coming to the throne of his son Sultan Abdülmecid I, Mehmet Ali finally withdrew due to European pressure, and the new Sultan and his office made the declaration of the edict known as the *Gülhane* (Rose-garden) that the imperial center was to mend its ways and adhere to the principles of Islam that were justice and the correct implementation of the Shariah.⁵³ In Ottoman history, this period has come to be known as the *Tanzimat* period in which Orientalist academics suggested that the Ottomans were now moving towards more westernizing/modernizing principles in the vain hope of survival.

Both Mehmed Ali and Mahmud II have been presented as autocratic modernizers. Both have been viewed as introducing modernity and, at the same time, being autocratic rulers. In Mehmed Ali Pasha's case, some have even said that dictatorship began during his reign in Egypt. But more recent studies by Fredrick Anscombe⁵⁴ and the late Butrus Abu-Manneh⁵⁵ have argued that Islam was far more important to the Ottoman world than others have suggested, and attempts to replicate Western successes while remaining loyal to the principles of Islam had become marginalized in the earlier historiography of the late Ottoman world.

⁵³ Butrus Abu-Manneh, "The Islamic Roots of the Gülhane Rescript," *Die Welt Des Islams* 34, no. 2 (1994): 173–203; Butrus Abu-Manneh, "Two Concepts of State in the Tanzimat Period: The Hatt-I Şerif of Gülhane and the Hatt-I Hümayun," ed. Kate Fleet, *Turkish Historical Review- Brill* 6, no. 2

⁵⁴ Frederick F. Anscombe, *State, Faith, and Nation in Ottoman and Post Ottoman Lands*.

⁵⁵ Butrus Abu-Manneh, Mehmed Ali Paşa and Sultan Mahmud II: The Genesis of a Conflict, *Turkish Historical Review* 1 (2010) 1-24.

But it must be added that the conflict between the two most powerful leaders in the Ottoman world did compromise the Ottoman domains greatly. The Pasha, concerned with facing the consequences of a Sultan intent on centralizing the domains at all costs, was aware that he needed to react in order to survive. However, his stronger army, his tactical skill, and the possibility of Mahmud's soldiers being reluctant to fight the Pasha meant that the Sultan was forced to take more drastic measures. First, he turned to the Russians for assistance; and second, he signed the Balta Liman treaty in which favorable tariffs were given to the British in the hope that this would undercut the economic influence of the Pasha who was now occupying much of *Balad al-Sham* and parts of Anatolia. The impact of the treaty was to introduce the Ottomans to capitalism and eventually compromised the autonomy of the Ottoman economy. The internal conflict drew much criticism from Muslims, both elite and lay; after the death of Mahmud, the *Gülhane* edict was the first semi-constitutional document in which the Ottoman government showed much introspection.

However, while the Ottoman government accepted that the actions of Mahmud had compromised the domains, nonetheless Mahmud's actions facilitated an environment of reform that would not have been possible during the reign of his predecessors. Loans were taken by the Ottoman central bank from the European powers in order to accelerate the reform program to bureaucratize the domains but ironically authority now shifted away from the Sultan and into the hands of the office of the Grand Vizier and Foreign office known as the *Bab-i-Ali* (Sublime Porte). Paradoxically, much of the work had been achieved by the aggressive policies of Mahmud II, as the Ottomans attempted to reform the political, educational, and legal systems. With the Sultanate losing much authority to the hands of the Sublime Porte, it was felt that the office of the Sultanate/Caliphate would simply become symbolic and, in 1292/1876, after much political turmoil, Sultan Abdülhamid II came to the throne as a constitutional Sultan.

It was during the *Tanzimat* period that nationalism, mainly in the Balkan provinces, became a challenge for the Ottomans. Nationalism, a mainly European idea, started to become problematic for the Ottomans as they attempted to establish an 'official'

state ideology of imperial patriotism that was called Ottomanism in which both Muslim and non-Muslim alike shared a common identity of being inhabitants of the Ottoman domains.⁵⁶ Most identities in the Ottoman domains were either religious or by locality. For example people would say they were Muslim, Greek Orthodox, or Jew, or that they were from Tripoli, Mardin, or Sanaa. While some academics have suggested that Ottomanism was a form of nationalism, one has to be a little skeptical as after the collapse of the Ottoman government the identity didn't survive, suggesting that the identity was simply for official use, not institutionalized for the vast majority of the Ottoman public. The notion of nationalism and nation-states started to exist only in the non-Muslim areas, as Muslims still maintained their loyalty towards the Sultan who was Caliph.

Also, this period in Ottoman history is known for two main ideas: Ottoman secularism and Ottoman Westernization or/and modernization. There is still much debate on the secularization narratives of the Ottoman domains. While some academics, including Muslim scholars, have suggested that the Ottomans were replicating modes of law and governance that resembled what was happening in Europe as a way of competing, other scholars have argued that law was still not centralized and local customs were adhered to in various parts of the Ottoman domains.⁵⁷ The question of law and secularism especially in what is known as the modern period has been a narrative simply accepted based on a few cases, but more detailed studies in various parts of the Ottoman domains present a far more complicated picture.

Also the notion of Ottoman modernity is also starting to be challenged as modernity is perceived as a Western experience that the Ottomans were negotiating with. While the domains were becoming centralized, they were in no way as centralized as the modern nation-state is, begging the question what was happening regarding the *ulema* and the challenges that they were facing throughout the Ottoman world. At the moment, Muslims still continue to focus on works by

⁵⁶ Şerif Mardin, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought: A Study in the Modernization of Turkish Political Ideas*, 1st Syracuse University Press ed., Modern Intellectual and Political History of the Middle East (Syracuse, N.Y. : Syracuse University Press, 2000).

⁵⁷ Samy Ayoub, "The *Mecelle*, Sharia, and the Ottoman State: Fashioning and Refashioning of Islamic Law in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 2:1 (2015) 121-146.

Salafist-reformists, without examining other parts of the Ottoman domains, especially Istanbul, which after all was the center of the Ottoman domains.

In Muslim circles, the debate surrounding the Sultan as Caliph losing control to the office of the Sublime Porte has begged the question of the diminishing role of the Caliphate as an institution within the late Ottoman polity. However, this would be an inappropriate conclusion, as the office still held much weight within the internal political culture. The *Tanzimat* period did attempt to strengthen the political structure and, more importantly, to facilitate a space for new legal practices. Increased literacy and learning meant new civil schools were created to supplement the seminal *medressa*. The need for translation, modern technocrats, and medical students meant that the *medressas* became an institution of the *ilmiyye*. The *Nizamiye* courts were created to support the Shariah courts and projects such as the *Mecelle/Medjellah* (civil code) as well as a Islamic constitution with a parliamentary system indicated to many Western academics that the Ottomans were replicating Western models. On closer inspection, however, academics who have studied the *Nizamiye*, *Mecelle*, and civil schools have started to argue that all three institutions were within the remit of Islamic thought.⁵⁸ This debate thus comes down to perspective and how the Islamic is qualified regarding these structures.

The *Tanzimat* period was also a period of much cultural production in which Ottoman literature went through a renaissance, at a time where the Arabic-speaking world was also experiencing an *al-Nahda*. The *al-Nahda* narratives have to be seen in relation to what was happening in the Ottoman center as Ottoman Turkish was also witnessing an increase of Arabic forms in the language, especially in the printed press.

Architecture was also experiencing a new synthesis in which the Ottomans were actively searching to establish a style that took inspiration from Europe, the Far

⁵⁸ Jun Akiba, 'Sharia Judges in the Ottoman Nizamiye Courts, 1864-1908,' *Osmanlı Araştırmaları/The Journal of Ottoman Studies*, Volume 51, 2018, pp. 209-237, Samy Ayoub, *The Mecelle, Sharia, and the Ottoman State*, pp. 121-146. For an alternative reading see Murteza Bedir, *Fikih to Law: Secularization Through Curriculum*, Islamic Law and Society, 2004.

East, and Africa where they used Ottoman Gothic styles, Ottoman Art Nouveau, with Moorish influences inspired by Andalusian mosques and buildings. In 1290/1873, the Ottomans established the notion of the *Usul-i Mi'mari-i Osmani* (the fundamentals of Ottoman architecture) in which they tried to establish a new style of Ottoman architecture. It was an attempt to mainstream the Ottoman dynastic building and redefine it to a new Ottoman architectural style that was supposed to be highly evolved.⁵⁹ Much of the narratives surrounding the *Tanzimat* period are centered on whether the Ottomans were moving closer to the West; thus, the question being asked is whether the Ottomans were moving away from Islam. It is worth asking how Islam and Muslims can have a synthesis with that which is not considered Islamic. Late Ottoman history is still going through such a debate, a debate that is not only important to Muslims living in the West but to Muslims worldwide. How do Islam and the 'Modern' interact with one another? There is still much that can be learned from the late Ottomans.

Sultan Abdülhamid II—The pious sultan

Upon coming to the throne, Sultan Abdülhamid II fashioned a policy that was to emphasize the outwardly expression of Islam far more prominently than his predecessors.⁶⁰ This led some historians to believe that his policies were a shift from the policies of the *Tanzimat*, suggesting that the Tanzimat period reflected a moment of shifting away from Islam with the Hamidian returning back to Islam. However, on closer inspection this type of analysis is somewhat short-sighted in not recognizing that much of what Abdülhamid did was a continuation of prior policies.

With a loss of some of the Balkan provinces, mainly Christian such as Greece and Serbia, it was felt that only an emphasis on Islam around the patronage of the Sultan as Caliph would provide the necessary loyalty from Muslims to protect the

⁵⁹ Ahmet A. Ersoy, *Architecture and the Late Ottoman Historical Imaginary – Reconfiguring the Architectural past in a Modernizing Empire*, Routledge, 2015, pp. 2-18.

⁶⁰ Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire 1876-1909* (London : I. B. Tauris, 1998).

Ottoman domains. Abdülhamid thus reached out to Muslims within the domains and even outside by supporting Muslim projects as a way of attaining the loyalty of Muslims even outside the Ottoman borders. Internally, however, while the Sultan began as a constitutional Sultan, he quickly abandoned the constitution and parliament to return to a policy similar to Mahmud's of being a strong and stoic ruler. Known as the pious Sultan, Abdülhamid II ruled the Ottoman domains for three decades, based on a policy of a strong office of the Sultanate, Islam, reform, and conservatism.⁶¹ Politics and statecraft is a delicate business however, and the Sultan's ability to remain in authority for so long involved the marginalization of other factions; such is the nature of politics. After a series of attempts to agitate change, finally in 1326/1908 a group of military men, ideologues and *ulema* fashioned a revolution for the reinstatement of the Ottoman constitution of 1293/1876, which became known as the Constitutional Revolution.

The revolution was initiated by a clandestine movement named the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) who demanded that the Sultan reinstate the constitution and parliament, championing a hybrid of slogans that combined the French Revolutionary ideals of *hurriyet/hurriyah*, *uhuvet/uhuwah* and *musavat/musawah* (Freedom, Equality, and Liberty) with the slogans of *Mesveret/Mashwarah*, *Adalet/Adalah*, and *Nizam/Nitham* (Consultation, Justice, and Order) from the Ottoman political culture. The Sultan yielded and, while an internal contestation on the 9th of Rabi al-Awwal 1327/31st March 1909 attempted to weaken CUP control over the government, with the help of the military, the rebellion in Istanbul was crushed and Abdülhamid II was deposed due to pressure from parliament. The Ottoman world was now a Constitutional Caliphate with a parliamentary system.⁶² It was hoped that the parliament could function both as an avenue for *şura/shura* and *ictihad/ijtihad*; instead the Italian invasion of Libya in 1329/1911, and then the Balkan wars in 1330-1331/1912-1913, paralyzed the Ottoman government as it became embroiled in World War One on the side of the Germans.

⁶¹ Feroze Yasamee, *Ottoman Diplomacy: Abdülhamid II and the Great Powers 1878-1888*, Studies on Ottoman Diplomatic History; (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 1996), pp. 20-21.

⁶² Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, Reprint edition (Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 72-250.

It was during the late 19th century that we view a renaissance of cultural production and intellectual production in languages such as in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, and even Ladino and Armenian. Islamic political thought was also going through a phase of transition with a view of maintaining the culture of the past and at the same time dealing with rapidly changing contemporary needs.⁶³ Trains, steamships, the printed press, telegram, and photography had rapidly changed the manner in which information, traveling, and ideology functioned. It was also during this period that ideas such as Ottomanism, 'Islamism,' and nationalism started to be debated among the thinkers of the Ottoman world as ideals that might unify the inhabitants of the Ottoman domains as Ottoman subjects started to become Ottoman citizens. In particular, Islamic political thought was presented in the printed press as the notion of a constitutional Caliphate where public opinion became important in creating a relationship between the ruler and the ruled. This suggests that in late Ottoman domains the nation-state was not a given and that an alternative political route could have been taken.

Furthermore, this was a period of revolution and calls for justice. Revolutions in Islamic societies have yet to call for the ousting of Islam as they are often designed for the reimplementation of Islamic rules and norms, at least in rhetoric. In 1323/1905 in Russia, 1324/1906 in Iran, and then in 1326/1908 in the Ottoman domains, revolutionary activity was enacted on each occasion for the instatement of some form of constitutional governance.⁶⁴ The fact that we see a similar thing happening today in various parts of the Muslim world forces us to ask how Islam, just governance, so-called autocracy, and revolutionary activity were instantiated in the late 19th century.

The end of the Ottoman domains

A series of mistakes made in the war weakened Ottoman authority in the provinces as the victories of the Allied forces, and an internal rebellion in the Arab provinces

⁶³ İsmail Kara, *İslâmcıların Siyasî GörüŖleri* (Dergah Yayınları, 2001).

⁶⁴ Nader Sohrabi, "Global Waves, Local Actors: What the Young Turks Knew about Other Revolutions and Why It Mattered," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44, no. 01 (January 2002), pp. 45–79.

meant that by 1336/1918 the Ottomans had lost all of the Arab provinces to the French and British, with the Russians finally pulling out of the war due to the Bolshevik revolution in the same year. Now with two governments, one in Istanbul and one in Ankara, led by Mustapha Kemal Pasha (later known as Atatürk), the Ottoman political powers were facing civil war.⁶⁵

It was hoped that Muslims around the world would support the Ottomans in the war effort; in India, the Muslims organized a movement known as the Khilafat Committee in hopes of saving the Ottoman world and ridding themselves of British occupation in India.⁶⁶ The French were also afraid that the Algerians would not fight the Ottomans during this war. In the end, the Ottomans were defeated, and Mustafa Kemal's government dissolved the Sultanate in 1341/1922 and then the Caliphate in 1342/1924.

The Caliphate existed after the fall of Abdühamid II but it can be argued that it was only symbolic. As an institution in Islam, the Caliphate was suggested to be simply a symbol or a metaphor for Muslim power that was no longer needed which allowed for its dissolution. The authority of the Caliphate had its roots in Islamic theology, established in the literature of the *ulema* in the medieval period and further consolidated throughout the Ottoman period up until its collapse.⁶⁷ Six hundred years of Ottoman rule had come to an end due to the devastation of World War One, as the European powers created nation-states in the region as a way of sharing the resources of the ex-Ottoman domains. In the case of Turkey, while it was not colonized, it chose to uphold the values of the European powers as it now saw this as the model of success. With the leaders of the CUP assassinated or killed in battle, the remaining members of the Ottoman family and *ulema* were exiled from what was to be known as the secular Turkish Republic, not to return until more recently.

⁶⁵ Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East, 1914-1920* (London, Penguin, 2016).

⁶⁶ Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement- Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 65-207.

⁶⁷ Mona Hassan, *Longing for the Lost Caliphate: A Transregional History* (Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 218-252.

For many Muslims at the time, and even now, there is a belief that the main reason for the Ottoman collapse was their abandonment of Islam. At the time, vigorous debates were being had about needing more people in society to pay attention to the basic principles of Islam. For others, there was a belief that the Ottomans had to be able to compete with the European powers in science, technology, and knowledge. Further still in the Ottoman political circles, a host of debates centered around the notion of political competency and the various forms of political governance Islam allows. It can be argued that these debates have yet to be resolved within Muslim circles.

A series of mistakes were made in World War One in which the Ottomans believed that that war, just like the wars in Libya and the Balkans, would only last a year or two maximum. The fact that the war went on for almost a decade shattered the human and structural resources of the Ottoman world. Added to the internal rebellions and contestation, the Ottoman government was fighting a war on two fronts, internally and externally. A host of tactical, diplomatic, and local mistakes meant that the Ottomans were struggling to regain control. Furthermore, famine and a host of natural disasters had many Muslims believing that they were being punished by Allah. Many Muslims were traumatized by witnessing the collapse of the domains and Caliphate. It was thought that they would return back to the Ottoman form of governance in some shape or form in the future, but after a decade the fact that nation-states were here to stay became more and more of a reality.

While Tsar Nicholas had described the Ottomans as the sick man of Europe, this claim was largely based on economic difficulties rather than political considerations. It has often been assumed that that throwaway comment was a reflection of the late Ottoman domains, even though the nineteenth century was showing that the Ottoman were going through a period of revival, in which they had shored up their administrative, military, and political structures.

It was an amazing achievement that the Ottomans in a short space of reform were able to bring their armies up to scratch such that they were able to fight a war against the Allied forces for so long. The collapse of the Ottoman state was not a foregone conclusion, as the Ottoman state over its six-hundred-year history managed to re-invent itself and transform over time. In the end, the devastating nature of World War One not only destroyed the Ottoman domains but also the Austrian-Habsburgs too with the British, Germans, and French losing much of their colonial influence after World War Two.

The collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate also raised a series of questions in the Muslim world regarding Islamic governance and the need for revival. Debates and discussions had already begun in the late nineteenth century but after that collapse, a number of *ulema* such as Mustafa Sabri Efendi and Sheikh Rashid Rida started to write works on trying to save the caliphate as an institution. While the nation-states had fashioned a history that saw the institution as irrelevant, more recent studies have shown that the Muslim community was far more affected and traumatized by its loss.⁶⁸ This, in turn, led to the establishment of various Islamic revivalist movements. While readers may want to see a series of mistakes where the Ottomans fell short in order to better make sense of the collapse of the domains, I would suggest instead to read Ottoman history as a dynasty that went through a series of challenges and changes in which its uniqueness was that it was able to survive so long; it is unlikely that another political entity in history would be able to do the same. This is because the Ottomans, more than a dynasty or a state, represented an idea, an idea that was heavily entrenched in Islam. The collapse of the Ottomans was not simply a collapse of structure, but how the successor nation-states went about uprooting the very idea that the Ottomans represented; it was the removal of the Ottomans as an idea that has led to the collective amnesia that many Muslims suffer from. However, so entrenched were the Ottomans in the history of Europe, Asia Minor, and Africa, that they still remain a source of contestation in which a revival is taking place in the Muslim consciousness to start to know more. This could be due to the possible fragmentation of the ideology of

⁶⁸ Madawi al-Rasheed and Carool Kersten, *Demystifying the Caliphate*, Columbia, Hurts, 2013.

the nation-state, in which more and more people in the region choose to ask what came before the nation-state.

Conclusion

Thus, the story of the six-hundred-year history of the Ottoman dynasty is one of transformation and evolution in political arrangement and traditions. It is a remarkable tale of the emergence, ascent, and traumatic collapse of a once global Islamic super-power. Yet it would be no exaggeration to claim that, until very recently, Muslim interest in the last Caliphate of the Islamic world has been somewhat subdued. There are a multitude of reasons why a collective amnesia has occurred regarding the Ottoman past. Ideology and power are a major reason why Muslims have not invested in a history that was part of their lives only a hundred years ago. Some might retort that there is no reason to privilege the Ottoman past over any other entity in Islamic history. Yet I am not arguing for an either/or, for I believe that Muslims should invest in the learning of all Islamic history—which inherently necessitates giving due consideration to each stage and era.

What makes the Ottomans a unique case is that over the last hundred years, historical narratives regarding the Muslim world have been influenced by paradigms of knowledge, ideology, and power that run counter to Muslim agency. Orientalist narratives regarding the writing of the history and collapse of the last Islamic Caliphate have become so engrained that Muslims have simply accepted several problematic conclusions regarding the nature of Islam and power, Islamic governance, authority/authorities, knowledge, identity, memory, 'Islamism,' nationalism, and Muslim agency. Although all of these debates still resonate with Muslims today, much of our approach and outlook on these rely on Orientalist and nationalist interpretations of Muslim history—and most of all, late Ottoman history.

As a lecturer in history, I always stress that we need to find new ways of providing the tools necessary for Muslims to understand our history. We have a rich tradition

of history-writing in the early Islamic era written by the *ulema*. History writing and biographies were written with the intent of understanding the tradition better, later evolving into narratives that served the Muslim community in being able to place their narratives along other civilizations such as in the examples of al-Tabari. With the advent of specializations in modern education, the study of history has been relegated to a secondary discipline within traditional seminaries, in favor of what are perceived to be more pressing issues. The new paradigms of education have somewhat compromised our worldview to the point that teaching history from an Islamic perspective of the last few centuries no longer feels like a priority, which has led to reliance on the narratives of Orientalism, modernization, and secularization.

This has resulted in the learning and writing of Islamic history becoming highly dependent on Western academia, which views the learning of history as a form of 'objective' analysis rather than a didactic or instructive endeavor. Nevertheless, there is no doubting that historians trained within academia have developed sophisticated and reliable methodologies for examining a large variety of sources. Official and private archives, memoirs, newspapers, journals, official data, photographs, along with works on ideology, narrative, memory, and discourse have created the need for specialist historians. In an ideal world, both Muslims in academia and *ulema* should work together to bridge the gaps in knowledge and obfuscation caused by Orientalist and non-Islamic interpretations of the past.

Ottoman studies has been heavily influenced by works in Western academia framed within Eurocentric/Orientalist narratives, treating the Ottoman world as an object of the Western gaze rather than independent from it.⁶⁹ Over the past decade or so, there have been revisionist attempts in Western academia to address the impact of Orientalist depictions of Ottoman history, but hardly any are done outside of the academic space/worldview. When Muslims have responded, they have been either reactionary rebuttals or nostalgic glorifications that have neither aptly responded to Orientalist positions nor helped the Muslim community in better

⁶⁹ Cameron Michael Amin, Benjamin C. Fortna, and Elizabeth B. Frierson, *The Modern Middle East- A Sourcebook of History*, pp.viii-xi.

understanding how Ottoman history has become victim to specific political and ideological narratives. In spite of this contestation, younger generations of Muslims still find it challenging to see why Ottoman history should be important to them. Perhaps a welcome antidote to this is the recent popularity of Turkish historical dramas and TV shows, which have done much to create interest regarding the Ottoman past. In this regard, both the *alim* and historian have to consider the new image this has given Turkish history, especially as Muslims globally are starting to show increasing interest.

Most researchers studying the Ottoman past in Western academia continue to facilitate Western political and ideological interests at the expense of people of the formerly Ottoman domains, Muslims and non-Muslims. It is worth investigating how an Islamicate world influenced not only Muslim culture but non-Muslim cultures too, in which peoples from a host of different religious denominations were able to live under Islamic rule for such a long period of time.

Both scholars who embraced Western hegemonic narratives about the Ottoman past (orientalists) and those who critiqued them (revisionists) were heavily influenced by master narratives of the region and its history over the last century or two. Most of the narratives prevalent within Western academia were not developed in the formerly Ottoman lands and certainly not by Muslims.⁷⁰ Yet these narratives have become so deeply ingrained that we continue to treat terms such as ‘Sultan’ as characteristic of despotism, unaware that language in the Western press has deliberately imposed these connotations upon institutions in the non-West since the nineteenth century and continues to do so today. Sultan Abdülhamid II was portrayed in the Western press in the late nineteenth century as an oriental despot, yet what is surprising is how these connotations have been internalized by Muslims to the point that even the Muslim political psyche has come to see the rule of any sultan as an unfortunate or undesirable turn of events, rather than a reflection of an Islamic historical reality.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Of course it should come as no surprise that Western historiography would place Ottoman history within the purview of the Western gaze. However, the Ottomans as a so-called 'European Empire,' or at least a state on the frontier regions of Europe, deserves better attention regarding the mutual systematic influences they had with Europe that have been critically overlooked.⁷¹ Narratives of Ottoman history present Ottoman inferiority regarding Europe, especially from the 18th century onwards, in which it only sought to emulate its Western neighbors but gave nothing in return; these narratives perpetuate the broader European narrative that Muslims and Islam did not offer the world, let alone Europe, anything worthy of note. One could argue that not much has changed regarding how Muslims and their contributions are represented in mainstream spaces.

The point of note is that, while narratives of the Ottomans have been shaped by European historiography, what is missing is that the Ottomans played a significant role in shaping European history and identity for the last few hundred years as a mutual actor with shared interests, peoples, and traditions. Instead, Ottoman history written mainly from an Orientalist perspective has portrayed and fashioned European identity in opposition to the Ottomans as the external Other to be feared and despised. As mentioned, from the perspective of European historiography, we learn about European influences on the Ottomans but very little of the influence of the Ottomans and Islam on Europe, even during the height of the so-called Ottoman 'Golden Age' of Suleiman the Law Giver. The fact that this point is ignored is not only a problem regarding the loss of Muslim agency regarding Muslim contributions to Western historiography, but more significantly that depictions of Islam and Muslims in Europe continue to perpetuate a narrative that has done very little to acknowledge Islam's existence within Western society and its political configurations.

But the Ottomans should not be reduced to simply their relationship with Europe. The complexity of the Ottoman domains is that they straddled three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa. Ottoman narratives regarding its neighbors and its

⁷¹ Halil İnalcık, *The Ottoman Empire and Europe – The Ottoman Empire and Its Place in European History* (İstanbul, Kronik Books, 2017), pp. 11-12.

interaction with parts of Africa, Russia, the Asian Subcontinent and China receive very little attention. We have yet to learn how all these different peoples, nations, cultures, and traditions exchanged with the Ottoman domains and vice versa. The Ottomans were not simply looking West, but also East, North, and South; their society was one that reflected multicultural protected domains unlike any other in the history of Islam. Thus, a thorough study of the Ottomans is in fact a study of global history and how the Islamic domains encompassed the multiculturalism of the world. In that sense, I stress my earlier point that Ottoman history should matter to all Muslims, as the Ottoman domains were not simply Turkish, nor a frontier dominion that was European; it was an African and Asian state as much as a European one. In fact, Ottoman interactions in Africa are far too understudied for us to have any meaningful analysis either way of whether the Ottoman presence in Africa was overall positive or negative. It becomes more so imperative to study this area of Ottoman history as Africa is a Muslim continent and interactions among Muslim peoples, governments, and authorities require far more sensitive examination from the culture and traditions of Islam than the narratives of Western academia have offered. Additionally, too many narratives place emphasis on the ruling structures, but a closer examination of the Ottoman domains from its people and the ideas that it represented indicates that the Ottoman world was indeed a multi-ethnic one that encompassed different denominations of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. There is much for Muslims to contribute to the study of the Ottoman world.

The hardest question is where does one start? In a world in which readers want a simple primer that can answer most questions, the historian in me can simply answer that question by saying there is no easy way out. The hope is that more and more Muslims demand to know more about the Ottoman past in order to force those of us who are experts to help facilitate Muslims' needs and interests better. While there are a host of primers in Western academia where some monumental works have been written, nonetheless I suggest that the first step should be to contact historians who are Muslim to be more engaged within the community to facilitate a medium of learning that is not simply restricted to the libraries of universities. At the moment, however, it can not be denied that Western academic

circles continue to be the better places to study Ottoman studies. It would be fitting if scholars from the traditional seminaries and academics could come together to create programs in which Muslims can start to re-examine their own history in ways that stem from their own tradition, while being mindful of the numerous sources that are required in writing about the past. The academic by nature is not designed to be an activist, and yet this is exactly what is required today.

As stressed earlier, the writing of Islamic history and of our past is fundamentally an issue of agency, control, and existence. It should be a given that we be in control of how we view ourselves and how we belong to the *ummah* of the past as much as the *ummah* of today or the future. To be able to create such connections, Muslims have to be aware that not only does Western academia have a host of blind spots, but that the ways in which the academy examines history are not designed to give meaning to Muslims. While Muslims may feel that they can establish such meaning by attaining careers in the academy, nonetheless, it is also required that they produce literature for the wider Muslim community. The decentralization of traditional knowledge structures due to the democratization of knowledge via the Internet has meant that there are a host of avenues one can explore in teaching Islamic history to the interested student. In a culture of consumption, while many readers may want to know more about the Islamic past, we as a community need to also facilitate an environment where we are once again producers of knowledge for the Muslim community, for both today and the future. It is thus my opinion that we need to reclaim the narratives that are written about our past so that we can reclaim our existence in the world we live in. Indeed this is much easier said than done, but as Muslims we must indeed have hope in Allah and this *ummah*.

I started this essay by asking a set of questions. I further pressed on the point that the Qur'an and, by extension, the Islamic viewpoint of writing about the Islamic past is something that should be central to the Muslim historian. However, there is no doubt that much writing is taking place in more secular domains. It is therefore my view that it is imperative that Muslims try to forge or fashion a writing of the Ottoman past that finds meaning from a Islamic perspective and is simultaneously

aware of some of the ideologically driven narratives that are produced in academic circles. Studies on Ottoman history require further Muslim engagement with the history writing of the Ottoman past seen as Islamic and inclusive of the Muslim voice in the way the Muslim needs to exist in this world. I hope that this essay, rather than pressing home any conclusive points, can start a discussion that encourages more Muslims to ask why the learning of our history is important.