

The New Eastern Question

Seyid Ould Abbah



Henry Laurens, a prominent French historian specializing in the contemporary history of the Middle East, has devoted a substantial portion of his writings to what is known as the “Eastern Question”, a term referring to the circumstances surrounding the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire amid European interventionist policies, the emergence of nation-states in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Arab world, and the birth of modern Turkey.

Unlike Western historians who viewed the Ottoman Empire as a form of internal colonization of the European continent and as a state that oppressed the nationalities and religions within it, Laurens argues that it should be understood through the lens of a complex, interactive history among the peoples, nationalities, and religious communities (millets) that made up this vast space stretching from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. The great political genius of the Ottoman sultans, he suggests, lay in developing governance and control mechanisms suited to administering this immense regional space, marked by deep diversity and difference. The imperial state was not an anomaly in the global system; rather, the disintegration of the Ottoman state fits within the context of a qualitative political transformation that affected the various empires existing in Europe at the time, most notably the Tsarist Russian Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Independence on the Ottoman peripheries (Eastern Europe and the Balkans) occurred according to the same principle that took shape in Central Europe: the emergence of identity not based on contractual solidarity (as in France) or shared historical-cultural origins (as in Germany), but on a triad religious unity, linguistic unity, and an independent political entity. From the late eighteenth century onward, European powers, particularly Britain and Russia, encouraged the national demands of the peoples and communities that later separated from the Ottoman Sultanate. This process began with Greece in 1821, leading to Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1831, followed by Bulgaria in 1878, and then the separatist wars in the Balkans in 1912.

What Laurens shows is that the rise of nationalist tendencies in the Ottoman context was accompanied by bloody massacres and devastating civil wars, resulting in a massive wave of ethnic cleansing, of which only the Armenian case became widely known, even though what occurred in Greece and the Balkan countries was no less bloody and ferocious. The price was paid by those referred to as “Muslim Turks,” even though these groups comprised multiple national affiliations united by Islam and later became components of the Turkish national fabric.

Laurens also argues that the Ottoman millet policy, intended to organize public taxation and facilitate population administration, gradually transformed religious groups into national peoples with political demands, noting that this national consciousness is a recent phenomenon directly linked to European interventionist policies.

On the Jewish state, Laurens observes that it followed the same model of national formation as in Eastern Europe, insofar as Jews were denied the right to belong to the new nations built on a religious basis (Orthodox or Catholic). This pushed them to transform religious affiliation into a national identity by creating a common language and reviving the imagery of an ancient sacred state.

In the Arab world, however, the national question was more complex, due to the impossibility of founding it on a religious basis given the shared religious unity between Turkey and Arab peoples, and the absence of a genuine Arab separatist tendency at the political and ideological levels. Therefore, Arab national consciousness could not have emerged outside European interventionist policies, which became active from the nineteenth century through decisions to “protect” religious minorities in the Arab East, before shifting to European mandate strategies after World War I.

What happened is that the builders of modern Turkey (led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk) managed to resist European plans for dismantlement (the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920) and achieve an independent nation-state (the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923). As for the Arab Middle East, it underwent a political formation process that extended until 1920. The Sykes–Picot Agreement was, in reality, largely a myth: it was never implemented in practice and was not signed by the individuals whose names it bears; rather, it was signed in a revised form by Paul Cambon, the French ambassador in London, and Edward Grey, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

With the exception of the Lebanese case, the British–French map adopted the Ottoman administrative divisions, often in coordination with Arab Ottoman elites who successfully opposed dividing Syria into confessional statelets. Laurens notes that the new nation-states in the Arab world were founded on a duality of political belonging: on the one hand, they rest on Arab national identity, with its implications for the ideal of unity and integration; on the other hand, they are the product of a local imaginary often reconstructed on the basis of narrow national particularities—even by invoking distant histories (Phoenician, Pharaonic, and so on).

After the events of the Arab Spring and the Daesh fitna in Iraq and Syria, the “Eastern Question” has been renewed, in Laurens’s words, meaning the intervention of Western powers in line with current trends and scenarios that affect the political engineering of the Middle East.

To conclude these observations on Henry Laurens's thesis, one can say that the tripartite Turkish–Arab–Balkan map still forms the axis of the broader Middle Eastern regional system today. It is no longer possible to strategically separate these three components, while also emphasizing the impossibility of resurrecting an Ottoman identity or justifying any illegitimate intervention in internal Arab affairs. The American strategy under former President George W. Bush Jr. adopted the concept of a “New Middle East” stretching from North Africa to Afghanistan. Although this concept did not become an objective foundation for real international policies, it expresses the organic link between the sides of the Arab-Islamic circle, a link with clear historical and geopolitical foundations.

About the writer:

Seyid Ould Abah (also written Abdullah Seyid Ould Abah) is a Mauritanian academic and public intellectual, and a professor of philosophy and social sciences at the University of Nouakchott. He writes widely as a columnist in multiple media outlets, and is the author of several books on philosophy as well as political and strategic thought.