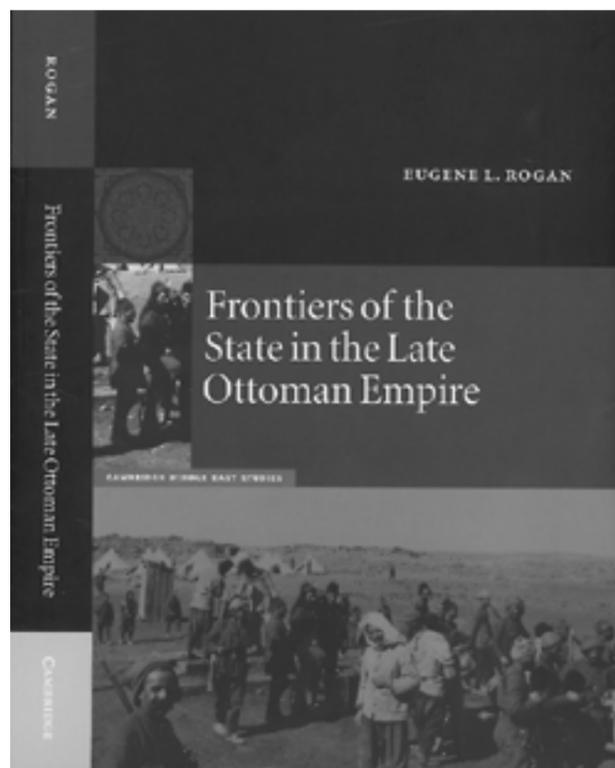


Middle East

EUGENE ROGAN

Western missionaries are credited with introducing many changes to Middle Eastern societies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their influence on the Ottoman state is less well known. Competing with Protestant and Catholic missionaries for the minds, souls, and bodies of its Arab subjects, the Ottomans adopted Christian missionary methods to beat them at their own game.



The south-eastern corner of Ottoman Syria lay beyond the reach of the government's authority until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A thinly-populated contact zone between the desert and the sown, the peasants and Bedouin of Transjordan had more in common with each other than they did with the urban cultures of neighbouring Jerusalem, Nablus and Damascus. This was particularly true in terms of spiritual affairs. Far from the centres of orthodoxy, the residents of Transjordan had grown highly unorthodox in their religious practices. The large Christian minority abstained from alcohol and pork and some Christian men were known to take a second wife when the first failed to conceive. The Muslims, for their part, imposed none of the restrictions on Christians common in urban Syria or Palestine. Christians were free to ride the same size mount as Muslims, to wear any colour of the rainbow, and to trade insults and blows with Muslims as among equals when they had a falling out. Indeed, it was even reported that Muslims would take their infants to be baptised by a Greek Orthodox priest to protect them from harm.

#### An Open Door

Following the establishment of direct Ottoman rule in northern Transjordan in 1867, Christian missionary societies were quick to enter the field. British and German Protestants of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and French and Italian Roman Catholics dispatched by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem were attracted by the high degree of tolerance which they encountered in Transjordan. Not only could they hope to win over large numbers of Greek Orthodox Christians, but they believed Transjordan to be the one place in which they might win Muslim converts – particularly among the Bedouin tribes.

The missionary societies provided a wide range of social services hitherto neglected by both the Ottoman religious authorities

# Ottoman Muslim Missionaries and the Transjordan Frontier

and the state, such as education and medicine. They embarked on ambitious building projects to provide churches, schools and clinics. Initially, they met with support and even gratitude from the local Ottoman officials. By the 1880s, however, the Ottomans moved to impose stricter limits on Christian missionary activities in Greater Syria, and in Transjordan in particular. The missionaries responded by turning their attention to the southern reaches of Transjordan, to the Karak district, which still lay beyond direct government rule.

In February 1888, CMS missionaries Henry Sykes and Frederick Connor set out on a tour of Madaba and Karak to assess the prospects for mission work there. Connor was most enthusiastic: 'If the CMS avails itself of the present opportunity, it will gain an undisputed footing in Kerak before the Turkish authorities enter it.' Here was a tolerant society reminiscent of the Transjordan of the 1860s. 'The people are only nominal Moslems, and have not the same fanaticism as Moslems of Palestine and Syria. The door for evangelization in East and West Palestine is practically closed; in the Kerak district it is open.'

As it turned out, the CMS only opened its mission in Karak after the Ottomans entered the town in 1893. The Latins too re-established their mission in Karak in 1894. The Ottoman state they confronted was determined not to allow agents of foreign powers to disrupt their delicate work in Transjordan's newest frontier. The Ottoman government had to provide the services which they forbade missionaries to deliver. They recognized the dubious religiosity of the tribesmen at the Transjordan frontier. The problem was more aggravated the further one moved south. Ottoman assessments of the inhabitants of the Karak district did not differ from those of the missionaries. As the governor in Damascus wrote in 1894:

'Although there are in excess of 50,000 Muslim tribesmen estimated to be living within the region of Ma'an [i.e. southern Transjordan, including Karak], they have long been born into savagery and ignorance of Islamic religious duties and regulation of prayer. ...One does not encounter one man in a thousand who performs his prayers... Given the absence of mosques and prayer rooms it is only natural that they should abandon prayer, for even if they so desired there are no places of worship to be found.'

#### The Ottoman response

To forestall missionary work among Muslims, the Ottoman government sought to build on the Muslim identity preserved among those who observed none of the outward practices of Islam. On entering Karak, the Ottoman government sought to endow its new regional capital with a Friday mosque. The governor of Syria petitioned the Imperial Palace with the drawings and costings for a new structure built on the site of the ancient mosque 'founded by Faruk [i.e. the Caliph Umar] at the time of the [7<sup>th</sup> century] conquest of Syria, destroyed five or

six centuries ago.' The cost of constructing the mosque, with a school attached, was estimated by army engineers in the region of 300,000 piasters. Over the next two decades, old mosques were restored and new ones built along the length of the Transjordan frontier, by local initiative and with government support.

The Ottomans were equally concerned to counteract the proselytizing of Christian missionaries among Muslims. The state consistently sought to provide spiritual guidance to Muslim communities within reach of European missionaries. For example, to counteract the work of Christian missionaries in the Hawran in 1886, the provincial authorities in Damascus dispatched Quranic teachers to work with the tribes, 'provided with a tent and a camel to carry it when the tribe removes from place to place.' Similarly, Sultan Abdülhamid II called for the posting of 'village preachers' (*köy imamları*) to every village in those districts of rural Syria where 'Muslim children are sent to schools opened by foreigners.' He also called for the provincial printing presses to publish books and treatises for distribution as a means of reaching the literate.

These calls for Quranic teachers to work among the tribes and for village preachers became particularly acute after the Ottoman entry into Karak, given the determination of the Latin and Protestant missionaries to make inroads among the Muslims there. In 1896, the CMS was represented by Frederick Johnson, an accredited medical doctor. The audacity of the British medical missionary was confirmed in April 1897 when Dr Johnson travelled the short distance from Karak to Qatrana to visit 'the Hajj Pilgrims on their outward journey with the idea of discovering the existence or not of opportunities for the Medical Missionary.' He met with the 'Pasha of the Hajj' and other officials and, not surprisingly, was dealt a warning six months later from the British Consul in Damascus 'enclosing a copy of a Note Verbale received from the Sublime Porte in which further complaint is made of your action in the matter of proselytism among Moslems.'

#### Muslim missionaries

Ottoman officials continued to follow the work of European missionaries in the Karak district very closely. The governor in Damascus sent a telegram to the imperial palace in December 1898 with the familiar refrain of 'Latin and Protestant foreign missionaries opening unlicensed schools and educating wild and uncivilised Arab Muslim children devoid of Islamic beliefs.' However, his solution was to imitate the societies they sought to suppress, and to dispatch Hanafi Muslim 'missionaries' (*misyönerler*) to the Karak district to work in pairs among the tribes on state salaries of 150 piasters each. Similarly, the office of the Sheyhülislam dispatched salaried preachers to remedy the ignorance of Islamic practice in Ma'an in July 1899.

The news of the Muslim missionaries was received with alarm by the CMS, and dismissed with derision by the Latins. CMS missionary Henry Harding wrote to a British supporter in 1899 asking him 'to sympathize

with my feelings on learning that the Turks are sending fourteen fully trained Moslem missionaries to Kerak, and these are on their way now.' The Dominican priest Antonin Jausen claimed that the Muslim missionaries made little impression on the natives of the Karak region. Some results were obtained in getting the Bedouin to observe the fast of Ramadan, though respect for the fast was localized: more fasting in the town, less among the plateau lands of Karak, and no observation at all among such independent tribes as the Bani Hamida, Bani Sakhr and Huwaytat.

The injunction to pray five times daily, he claimed, was even less respected. According to Jausen, the Bedouin found the prostrations of prayer dishonourable and dismissed the practice as 'the prayers of the *efendis* (officials)'. Once having learned to pray, Jausen claimed the knowledge was only used out of political motives as part of 'official life' when visiting government offices in town. He cited as an example members of the Huwaytat tribe who 'had themselves initiated in the *art* of prayer and submitted to those practices only when they went to the *Saray* (government offices).'

It is regrettable that our records provide no local reactions to the Ottoman missionaries to balance the opinions expressed by such interested parties as the Catholic and Protestant observers. All that can be said of the European accounts is that they confirm the dispatch of Ottoman missionaries. In all probability, the Hanafi missionaries met with no more success than the Protestants or Catholics in trying to impose new values on the people of Transjordan. For when, in 1910, the people of Karak revolted against the state's centralizing initiatives, they sacked the Friday mosque along with all the other structures built by the Ottoman authorities as another symbol of repressive state rule. ♦

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