



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Rethinking Middle Eastern statehood at the end of the First World War

Yenen, A.A.

Citation

Yenen, A. A. (2023). Rethinking Middle Eastern statehood at the end of the First World War. *Contemporanea*, (3), 472-478. doi:10.1409/107852

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3634218>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Rethinking Middle Eastern Statehood at the End of the First World War

In recent years, historians have reexamined the emergence of the modern state-system in the Middle East after the Ottoman Empire's dissolution. This new historiography challenges conventional narratives of imperialism and nationalism. Recent contributions have explored the violent transformation of state sovereignty from the Ottoman Empire to various colonial and independent nation-states¹, uncovered the neglected processes of defining post-Ottoman territoriality², and critically studied the role of identity politics in processes of nation-state formation³. In the historiography of the nation-state formation after the Ottoman Empire's dissolution, two dominant narratives emerged in the last decades. The liberal-cosmopolitan narrative mourns the loss of a multicultural coexistence and laments the violent nature

of nation-state formation. The anti-imperialist narrative, on the other, sees nation-state formation as a violent consequence of imperialism, emphasizing how failed imperial governance and foreign imperialism contributed to conflicts among national movements and the Ottoman Empire's disintegration. While seemingly mutually exclusive, these narratives share a common structural story in explaining the complex historical processes of post-imperial nation-state formation. This recognition prompts historians to rethink Ottoman and post-Ottoman statehood at the nexus of empires and nation-states⁴.

Placing emphasis on nation-state formation risks succumbing to the fallacies of methodological nationalism. First, methodological nationalism recognizes nations

¹ The Arab Revolts of 2011 generated a new debate about the origins and sources of state sovereignty in the Middle East. L. Fawcett, *States and Sovereignty in the Middle East: Myths and Realities*, «International Affairs», 2017, 93, 4, pp. 789-807. The centennial of the First World War also initiated renewed interest in the emergence of modern nation-states in the Middle East. E. L. Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East*, New York, Basic Books, 2015; R. Gingeras, *Fall of the Sultanate: The Great War and the End of the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1922*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.

² J. Tejel, R.H. Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility, Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918-1946*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2021; C. Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2017.

³ B.T. White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2011; U.Ü. Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-50*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011; K.D. Watenpugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006; L. Robson, *States of Separation: Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2017.

⁴ For two remarkable examples that combine these two narratives in a critical and comprehensive manner, see H. Kayalı, *Imperial Resilience: The Great War's End, Ottoman Longevity, and Incidental Nations*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2021; M. Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

and nation-states as static and independent entities in social research, disregarding the constructed, transnational, and inter-sectional nature of nationhood⁵. Second, methodological nationalism views the emergence of nation-states as a teleological and inevitable progression, overlooking the contingent factors, contextual influences, and unintended consequences that shape state formation⁶. Third, methodological nationalism treats nationalism as an explanatory concept rather than a social phenomenon that requires explanation⁷. In the historiography of the transition from the Ottoman Empire to nation-states from the Balkans to the Middle East, overcoming the confines of methodological nationalism is a formidable challenge⁸.

Even self-proclaimed post-nationalist approaches unintentionally perpetuate methodological nationalism. In Turkey, for instance, revisionist «post-Kemalist» perspectives have invaluable deconstructed Turkey's official historiography but became also essentialist in reducing all of Turkey's problems to results of the Kemalist nation-state formation⁹. The

disclosure of the populist authoritarianism of the Justice and Development Party that had been supported by post-Kemalist scholars since the 2000s as a remedy to Turkey's foundational national defects led to an epistemological crisis in Turkish Studies, sparking the current «post-post-Kemalism» debate¹⁰. This call for a «revision of revision» emphasizes the need for a critical reassessment of Turkey's modern history that goes beyond the Kemalist and post-Kemalist paradigms. It invites us to rethink the determinism of the transitional period from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic in explaining Turkish state and society until today.

Moving beyond methodological nationalism invites us also to rethink the categorical differentiation between empires and nation-states. It is crucial to acknowledge that empires and nation-states have more significant similarities than differences that set them categorically apart¹¹. The relationship between imperialism and nationalism is also rather intertwined than contradictory. Nationalist movements have commonly emerged within imperial contexts

⁵ A. Wimmer and N.G. Schiller, *Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences*, «Global Networks», 2002, 2.

⁶ D. Chernilo, *A Social Theory of the Nation-State: The Political Forms of Modernity Beyond Methodological Nationalism*, London, Routledge, 2007.

⁷ J. Breuilly, *Reflections on Nationalism*, «Philosophy of the Social Sciences», 1985, 1.

⁸ R.H. Öztan, *Nationalism in Function: «Rebellions» in the Ottoman Empire and Narratives in Its Absence*, in M.H. Yavuz, F. Ahmad (eds.), *War and Collapse: World War I and the Ottoman State*. Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 2016, pp. 161-202.

⁹ See, for example, H.L. Kieser (ed.), *Turkey Beyond Nationalism: Towards Post-Nationalist Identities*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2006.

¹⁰ Most prominently formulated in İ. Aytürk, *Post-Post-Kemalism: In Search for a New Paradigm*, trans. K. Cole, «European Journal of Turkish Studies», forthcoming, originally published as İ. Aytürk, *Post-Post-Kemalizm: Yeni Bir Paradigmaı Beklerken*, «Birikim», 319, November 2015, pp. 34-48.

¹¹ S. Malešević, *The Foundations of Statehood: Empires and Nation-States in the Longue Durée*, «Thesis Eleven», 2017, 1; K. Kumar, *Nation-States as Empires, Empires as Nation-States: Two Principles, One Practice?*, «Theory and Society», 2010, 2.

without necessarily opposing imperialism, and imperial powers have regularly promoted nationalist ideologies to further their own interests both domestically and internationally¹². Such a dynamic understanding of the interplay between imperialism and nationalism is particularly relevant in the context of the Middle East. Imperialism and nationalism emerged as strategic approaches during the era of the First World War in the service of state formation, leading to the emergence of new regimes of coercion and movements of subversion across societies in attempts to shape a new world order from the ground up¹³. It is necessary to challenge the simplistic contradictions often drawn between empires and nation-states and foster a more complex understanding of the state transformations, contentious politics, and international relations that unfolded at the end of the Ottoman Empire¹⁴.

To overcome the conceptual limitations that separate imperial and national politics, it is noteworthy to think more intrinsically about transgressive agency that challenge established boundaries, power dynamics, and social norms associated with statehood. Whether undertaken by state or non-state actors, transgressive agency disrupts the state's monopoly on coercion

and manifests new forms of subversion. Transgressive politics, characterized by its departure from the state/non-state, counterrevolution/revolution, and empire/nation binaries, involves the intricate interplay between coercion and subversion in complex processes of state failure and state formation¹⁵.

This conundrum requires a reexamination of the role of the «Young Turk» regime of the Committee of Union and Progress (Cup), which has been predominantly analyzed from a nationalist perspective by disregarding its imperial «staatsräson». While it is true that the Young Turks played a significant role in the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Turkish nation-state and pursued a transgressive nation-building policies, in contrast to the mainstream historiography, it is misleading to reduce their motivations and actions as solely driven by Turkish nationalism. The Young Turks wanted to save the Ottoman Empire and did not plan to replace it with a nation-state. The passingly mentioned episode of leading Cup members volunteering for commando missions against the Italian occupation of Ottoman Libya in 1911 deserves attention as it challenges received notions about empire and nationalism in the political worldview

¹² S. Berger, A. Miller, (eds.), *Nationalizing Empires*, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2015.

¹³ J. Wyrzten, *Worldmaking in the Long Great War: How Local and Colonial Struggles Shaped the Modern Middle East*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2022.

¹⁴ I have addressed some of these dynamics in A. Yenen, *Frontiers of Revolution and Empire in the Middle East*, in S. Berger, K. Weinbauer (eds.), *Rethinking Revolutions from 1905 to 1934: Democracy, Social Justice and National Liberation Around the World*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, pp. 81-107.

¹⁵ For a conceptual framework, see A. Yenen, R.H. Öztan, *Age of Rogues: Transgressive Politics at the Frontiers of the Ottoman Empire*, in *Ibid.* (eds.) *Age of Rogues: Rebels, Revolutionaries and Racketeers at the Frontiers of Empires*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2021, pp. 3-52.

of the Young Turks¹⁶. It is also essential to critically reassess the prevailing view that identifies a singular turning point, such as the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, as the catalyst for a surge in Turkish nationalist sentiments. Such a perspective oversimplifies the complex dynamics of the period and fails to account for the imperial reality that shaped the Cup's visions of multinational community and national supremacy¹⁷. Methodological nationalism also facilitated a secular bias in the study of nationalism that failed to give credit to the intricate relationship between statehood, ethnicity, and religion. Consequently, the Ottoman-Muslim nationalism of the Young Turks in their identity politics has often been disregarded in the historiography in favor of a focus on Turkish ethnic nationalism¹⁸. In this regard, the study of the Armenian Genocide provides another example where Turkish nationalism serves as the singular explanation of the Cup regime's demographic destruction of non-Muslim communities across Anatolia. However, it is imperative

to move beyond this deterministic understanding of nationalism and explore how contextual and contingent factors as well as regional and local power dynamics influenced the complex process of the genocide without relativizing the responsibility of the Cup regime in the displacement and destruction of Ottoman non-Muslims¹⁹. By critically reassessing the interplay between imperialism and nationalism, and delving into the complexities and contingencies of historical processes, we can gain a deeper understanding of the transformations that occurred at the end of the Ottoman Empire. The Young Turks continued to play a role in the tumultuous aftermath of the First World War. Again, beyond the determinism of ethnic nationalism, it was the contingencies of armed conflicts, the enduring culture of Ottoman-Muslim nationalism, and the interference of imperial geopolitics under the leadership of political actors who represented the «Young Turk zeitgeist» that shaped the nation-state formation in the post-Ottoman Middle East²⁰.

¹⁶ Ç. Oğuz, *Old Hostilities, New Propaganda: A Comparative Account of Public Opinion during the Italo-Turkish War of 1911*, «Eurasian Studies», 2022, 2; S. Hock, «Waking Us from This Endless Slumber»: The Ottoman-Italian War and North Africa in the Ottoman Twentieth Century, «War in History», 2019, 2; J.C. McCollum, *The Anti-Colonial Empire: Ottoman Mobilization and Resistance in the Italo-Turkish War*, PhD thesis, University of California Los Angeles, 2018.

¹⁷ For critical interventions, see A. Yenen, *Envisioning Turco-Arab Co-Existence Between Empire and Nationalism*, «Die Welt des Islams», 2021, 1; R.H. Öztan, *Point of No Return? Prospects of Empire After the Ottoman Defeat in the Balkan Wars (1912-1913)*, «International Journal of Middle East Studies», 2018, 1.

¹⁸ E.J. Zürcher, *Young Turks, Ottoman Muslims and Turkish Nationalists: Identity Politics, 1908-1938*, in K.H. Karpat (ed.), *Ottoman Past and Today's Turkey*, Leiden, Brill, 2000, pp. 151-179; E.J. Zürcher, *The Vocabulary of Muslim Nationalism*, «International Journal of the Sociology of Language», 1999, 1.

¹⁹ Y. Türkyılmaz, *Rethinking Genocide: Violence and Victimhood in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1915*, PhD thesis, Duke University, 2011; M.A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires 1908-1918*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

²⁰ C. Aydın, *Post-Ottoman Turkey and the Geopolitics of Nationalism*, «The American Historical Review», 2022, 1; A. Yenen, *The «Young Turk Zeitgeist» in the Middle Eastern Uprisings in the Aftermath of World War I*, in M.H. Yavuz, F. Ahmad (ed.), *War and Collapse: World War I and the Ottoman State*. Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 2016, pp. 1181-1216; M. Provence, *Ottoman Modernity, Colonialism, and Insurgency in the Interwar Arab East*, «International Journal of Middle East Studies», 2011, 2.

When exploring the state formation, it is crucial to acknowledge that statehood exists on a spectrum, encompassing a wide range of variations. Such concepts that take into consideration non-state, quasi-state, or para-state entities raise critical awareness about ambiguities of state sovereignty, political control, and international recognition, revealing the intricate nature of political organization and governance possibilities beyond established norms. The establishment of the short-lived Provisional Government of Western Thrace during the Ottoman Empire's retreat from the Balkans in 1913 serves as an early example of state-making by utilizing transgressive tactics, leveraging rhetoric of liberal internationalism, and pursuing national self-determination during periods of imperial dissolution²¹. Similarly, the emergence of the Provisional National Government of the Southwestern Caucasus in 1918, in response to the disintegration of the Russian Empire, aimed to secure a pro-Turkish allegiance but faced significant challenges in realizing its objectives²². These examples highlight the complexities inherent in state-making attempts in contested territories. Following the Ottoman Empire's defeat in the First World War, the Syrian National Congress, a constituent

assembly founded in 1919 in Damascus, sought independence for a new Syrian Kingdom during the Peace Conferences but struggled against European imperialist influence and it was replaced by a League of Nations mandate under French control²³. In contrast, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, established in Ankara in 1920 as a revolutionary counter-government against the Sultan's government in Allied-occupied Istanbul, successfully resisted the colonial partition of Ottoman Turkey through guerrilla and military resistance, ultimately leading to the establishment of the independent Republic of Turkey in place of the Ottoman Empire²⁴. These cases of post-imperial experiments with statehood, among many others spanning from North Africa to Central Asia, exemplify the intricacies of state-making strategies and the challenges faced by nationalist movements in contested territories following imperial decline. Comparative studies of successful and failed state-making projects will offer valuable insights into challenges of political transitions, the complexities of national self-determination, and the difficulties of international recognition²⁵. The current historiography presents divergent perspectives on the roles of imperial-

²¹ The Provisional Government of Western Thrace still deserves its own dedicated study but for a brief overview, see B.C. Fortna, *The Circassian: A Life of Eşref Bey, Late Ottoman Insurgent and Special Agent*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 106-113.

²² A.E. Balistreri, *A Provisional Republic in the Southwest Caucasus: Discourses of Self-Determination on the Ottoman-Caucasian Frontier, 1918-19*, in Y.T. Cora, D. Derderian, A. Sipahi (eds.), *The Ottoman East in the Nineteenth Century: Societies, Identities and Politics*, London, I.B.Tauris, 2016, pp. 62-87.

²³ E. Thompson, *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Arab Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of Its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance*, London, Grove Press, 2020.

²⁴ R. Gingeras, *Last Days of the Ottoman Empire, 1918-1922*, London: Allen Lane, 2022.

²⁵ S. Reichmuth, *The Transformation of Muslim Societies and the Reorganization of Muslim Statehood During and After the First World War*, in H. Bley, A. Kremers (eds.), *The World During the First World War*, Essen, Klartext, 2014, pp. 47-58.

ism, internationalism, and nationalism in the process of post-Ottoman state formation in the Arab Middle East and Turkey²⁶. Scholars focusing on the Arab countries strongly criticize the League of Nations' designation of Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine as mandated territories, viewing it as a continuation of colonialism and capitulations justified by liberal internationalist rhetoric²⁷. In contrast, scholars of Turkey reject similar anti-imperialist narratives and instead emphasize the persecution of non-Muslims during the Turkish nation-state formation. If criticism is directed at liberal internationalism, then for its failure to address crimes against humanity and its compliance with Turkish nationalist demands²⁸. While the inherent imperialism of liberal internationalism during the peace settlement needs to be noted by scholars of Turkey, as in the Arab case, it is also important to acknowledge that liberal internationalism promoted the national homogenization of Turkey²⁹. The simultaneity of Ottoman imperialism, anti-imperial internationalism, and Turkish nationalism should not be regarded as a categorical anomaly but a political reality that needs to be studied

in its social complexity³⁰. Thus, it is crucial to understand that throughout history, both imperialists and anti-imperialists have been involved in persecuting minority groups³¹. The correlations between imperialism, internationalism, and nationalism necessitate further investigation to challenge one-sided narratives surrounding the establishment of a new international order in the Middle East.

In locating state-making in international relations, the new diplomatic history approach adopts a broader perspective, challenging conventional views of sovereignty and diplomacy, by taking into account alternative avenues of international politics³². Such an approach highlights the evolving dynamics of global interactions, including non-state actors, social movements, transnational networks, revolutionary organizations, and pariah states, offering a comprehensive understanding of the diverse actors in international relations. However, it is important to acknowledge that statehood still holds significant power in international politics, as states can persecute non-state challengers and exclude rival state-making attempts through international isolations

²⁶ This is clearly observable in U.S. Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2019.

²⁷ L. Robson, *Capitulations Redux: The Imperial Genealogy of the Post-World War I «Minority» Regimes*, «The American Historical Review», 2021, 5. See also C. Schayegh, A. Arsan, *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates*, London, Routledge, 2015.

²⁸ Most recent example of narratives is H.L. Kieser, *When Democracy Died: The Middle East's Enduring Peace of Lausanne*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023.

²⁹ C. Liebisch-Gümüß, *Embedded Turkification: Nation Building and Violence Within the Framework of the League of Nations 1919-1937*, «International Journal of Middle East Studies», 2020, 2.

³⁰ For a pioneering study, see C. Aydın, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007.

³¹ Some of these issues are addressed in A.D. Moses, *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

³² H. Alloul, M. Auwers, *What is (New in) New Diplomatic History?*, «Journal of Belgian History», 2018, 4.

and sanctions⁵³. Despite the challenges faced by non-state actors, statehood fulfills a crucial function in consolidating power. The transnational impact and the subsequent marginalization of non-state actors during the international recognition of the post-Ottoman Turkey demonstrate the potential of alternative modes of diplomacy but also underscore the significance of statehood⁵⁴.

To conclude, the emerging historiography on the rise of the modern state-system in the Middle East challenges traditional narratives and offers fresh perspectives. A

rethinking of statehood from a historical-sociological perspective, as I have elaborated in this article, requires a critical re-evaluation of methodological nationalism and the empire/nation-state dichotomy. By highlighting transgressive politics and state-making experiments at the nexus of empire and nation-state, I have illuminated opportunities for understanding alternative modes of agency, governance, and diplomacy, thereby enriching our comprehension of political transformations and international relations during the making of the modern Middle East.

Alp Yenen, Leiden University, Institute for Area Studies, Matthias de Vrieshof 4, 2311 BZ Leiden, The Netherlands
 a.yenen@hum.leidenuniv.nl
 Orcid: 0000-0002-2259-1484

⁵³ F. Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 229-260.

⁵⁴ C. Liebisch-Gümüş, A. Yenen, *Petitions, Propaganda, and Plots: Transnational Dynamics of Diplomacy During the Turkish War of Independence*, «Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies», 2023, 2; A. Yenen, *Internationalism, Diplomacy and the Revolutionary Origins of the Middle East's «Northern Tier»*, «Contemporary European History», 2021, 4.