

# The Middle East

- Decline of the Ottoman Empire
- The janissaries
- The Tanzimat Reforms
- The Greek War of Independence and Balkan nationalism
- Muhammed Ali's uprising
- The Eastern Question
- The Suez Canal
- The Balkan Crisis and the Congress of Berlin
- Enver Pasha and the Young Turks
- The Madhi
- The Great Game

The Middle East, with Islamic North Africa and Central Asia, underwent a fundamental transformation between the early 1700s and early 1900s. Before 1700, the Ottoman Empire, feared and respected throughout Eurasia as a great power, reigned supreme over most of this region. Where it did not, states such as Persia and the khanates of Central Asia stood strong and free.

After 1700, military setbacks at the hands of European enemies weakened the Ottoman Empire. Its European possessions gradually slipped away. Internal decay allowed outlying territories in North Africa to gain autonomy. Those territories were then taken into British, French, and Italian empires, further eroding Ottoman power. By the nineteenth century, the failing Ottoman Empire had earned an unflattering nickname: the “sick man of Europe.” Periodic reform efforts kept the state alive during the 1800s but did not stave off decline. More reform came at the beginning of the 1900s, but World War I destroyed the Ottoman Empire, which was then transformed into the modern Turkish state.

In the meantime, how to deal with the steady collapse of the Ottoman state and still maintain the European balance of power became one of the crucial foreign policy issues of the 1800s. This Eastern Question perplexed diplomats for decades.

European imperialism also dealt blows to other states in the Middle East and neighboring regions. Egypt, the Caucasus, Persia, and Central Asia came under European—mainly British and Russian—control during the 1800s.

## THE DECLINE OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

The Ottoman Empire sustained a heavy set of blows in the late 1600s and early 1700s. In 1683, the Turks nearly succeeded in capturing Vienna, capital of the Austrian Habsburgs. They failed and, in the next three and a half decades of fighting, lost battle after battle and much territory, including Hungary and Transylvania. The treaties of Karlowitz (1699) and Passarowitz (1718) left the Turks greatly diminished in Europe.

Occasional conflicts with Austria continued to sap Ottoman strength. Even worse were the periodic wars the Turks fought with Russia, especially against Peter the

Great in the 1710s and Catherine the Great in the late 1700s. With each new struggle, the Turks lost more territory.

## Internal Decay and Attempted Reform

Internal troubles also damaged the Ottoman state. Mediocre rulers and governmental corruption had weakened the political system during the 1600s and continued to do so in the 1700s. The dilemma was that sultans who wished to improve or modernize the system met with opposition from influential groups and officials with vested interests in the traditional way of doing things.

This was especially the case with the armed forces. The **janissaries**, who had been so innovative and effective in the 1500s and 1600s, became backward and complacent in the 1700s and early 1800s, refusing to adapt to new technology and tactics. Unfortunately for the empire, the janissaries were, until the 1820s, powerful enough to prevent any change for the better. For example, when Selim III tried to reform the bureaucracy and modernize the army and navy, the janissaries, fearing the loss of their privileged position, assassinated him in 1807.

Later sultans were more effective at changing the system. From the 1820s onward, the Ottoman leadership made some progress in modernizing the political system, the economy, and the military. The sultans boosted Western educational principles, scientific knowledge, and technological expertise. To a degree, they also secularized, against the protests of the traditional Islamic clergy. In the late 1820s, Mehmet III created a professional, European-style army and navy and then subdued the janissaries.

From 1839 through 1876, the Ottoman government introduced a wide-ranging set of changes known as the **Tanzimat reforms**. These reforms emphasized greater religious tolerance for the non-Muslims **millet**s (social groups categorized by religion) living in the empire, reform of the legal system, the creation of schools that would teach Western science and technology, the establishment of national telegraph and postal systems, and more. The Tanzimat reforms even included discussing the possibility of a constitution. Another effect of the reforms was to give women greater access to education. Public schools were founded for women, and more of them (although still a small number) began to enter public life in the late 1800s.

Still, such limited change was not enough to solve the empire's deep-seated internal and external problems. The Tanzimat reforms and other such measures alienated conservatives and traditionalists, who found them too extreme. Yet they did not do enough to satisfy the growing numbers of forward-looking politicians and military officers who wanted more change than the sultan was willing to make. By the early 1900s, this generation of modernizers, known as the **Young Turks**, would, from within the regime, play a decisive role in ending the sultan's rule.

## Revolts, Rebellions, and the Gradual Disintegration of the Ottoman Empire

Long before this, external problems such as rebellion and war were disintegrating the Ottoman Empire. In the early 1800s, an upsurge of nationalism, combined with

political turmoil caused by the Napoleonic Wars, led to many uprisings in Turkish-controlled Europe. Serbia revolted in 1807, and even though the revolt failed, the Serbs remained restless.

More seriously, the **Greek War of Independence** began in 1821. By 1827, France and Britain, responding to Christian Europe's outpouring of sympathy for the Greeks, aided the rebels (earlier, the poet Lord Byron had helped turn the war into an international cause by leaving England to fight and die on the side of the Greeks). Russia, sharing Greece's Eastern Orthodox faith, also joined the war. Defeated by this coalition, the Ottomans were forced to recognize Greek independence in 1832. At the same time, the Ottoman government had to cope with the rebellion of **Muhammad Ali** in Egypt and the growing autonomy of possessions in western North Africa.

## The Eastern Question

From the 1820s onward, the steady collapse of the Ottoman state presented the nations of Europe with a geopolitical challenge known as the **Eastern Question**. Although the Turks had been Europe's enemies since the 1300s, the Ottoman Empire was now seen as a satisfactory regime to have in place in the Middle East. It was no longer a real threat, it was predictable, and, for the time being, it held together many volatile parts of Asia and Europe. To destroy it or allow it to fall apart quickly might cause chaos or give birth to a new state that was strong and hostile.

Another aspect of the Eastern Question was that the nations of Europe did not wholly trust each other. The Ottoman Empire sat at a geographically crucial juncture: the crossroads of Europe and Asia, the joining of the Black and Mediterranean seas, and the Suez isthmus, which linked the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean and Asia. If one European country seized too much territory from the Ottomans at one time, it would upset Europe's fragile **balance of power**. Informally, the nations of Europe agreed to solve this part of the Eastern Question by not acting too suddenly or decisively in the region. The Ottomans' decline was to be managed carefully and slowly. If necessary, the European powers would prop up the empire if it seemed in danger of immediate collapse.

The complexity of the Eastern Question was illustrated many times. The Europeans took so long to help Greece in the 1820s because they feared causing too much damage to the Ottoman Empire at once. Soon after joining the Greeks *against* the Turks, Britain and France gave aid *to* the Turks by helping contain Muhammad Ali's revolt in Egypt; they worried that he would be too formidable an enemy if he toppled the Ottoman sultan. Sometimes the Eastern Question pitted the Europeans against each other; when Russia annexed Ottoman territory in the early 1850s, Britain and France fought alongside the Turks in the Crimean War (1853–1856), the first time since Napoleon's defeat that European powers clashed with each other.

Tensions worsened after 1870. The construction of the **Suez Canal** in 1869 increased the strategic and economic importance of Egypt, as well as Britain's and France's interest in the region. Italy's unification in the 1860s meant yet another European power with ambitions in the eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, Balkan **nationalism** intensified in the late 1800s. The **Balkan Crisis** (1876–1878) nearly destroyed the Ottoman Empire: when Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Montenegro

revolted against the Ottomans, Russia went to war on their behalf, beat the Turks, and imposed a harsh treaty. The rest of Europe, not wanting Russia to defeat the Turks too decisively, intervened. At the Congress of Berlin (1878), the four rebel nations gained their freedom, but the European powers compelled Russia to offer a more generous treaty to the Turks. Once again, the Eastern Question was dealt with through a combination of opportunistic land-grabbing and balanced management.

## The Ottoman Empire's Final Years

Domestically, the Ottoman Empire, steadily losing territory and constantly interfered with by the powers of Europe, suffered great difficulties as the 1800s came to an end. As the twentieth century began, the sultan's days were numbered. A group of pro-Western army officers, with a modern, secular outlook, began to form. They called themselves the **Young Turks**, and they were deeply dissatisfied with the sultan's failures to reform and strengthen the Empire. Led by Enver Pasha, the Young Turks seized control in 1908, neutralizing the last sultan and establishing a parliamentary government. The Young Turks modernized the military, aligned themselves with Germany, and began a series of social, economic, and political reforms.

However, they could not save the Ottoman Empire. Between 1911 and 1913, the Italians seized the Ottomans' last provinces in North Africa, and a coalition of Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria defeated the Ottomans in two Balkan Wars. Finally, during World War I, the Young Turk government sided with the Germans. Defeated by the Allies in 1918, the Ottoman Empire collapsed altogether, and its Middle Eastern possessions rebelled or were stripped away by the French and British. The empire was replaced by the modern Turkish state during the 1920s.

## EGYPT AND NORTH AFRICA

At its peak, the Ottoman Empire ruled most of Islamic North Africa. Even before the late 1700s, the empire's grip here was weakening owing to distance and the desire of cities such as Tripoli, Algiers, and Tunis for greater autonomy.

Things worsened with the Napoleonic Wars. In 1798, France sent Napoleon to capture Egypt and the Suez isthmus. He easily defeated Egyptian and Turkish armies, temporarily deposing the Mamluks who ruled Egypt on the Ottomans' behalf. Although the English restored the regime, Ottoman authority in Egypt was badly damaged.

## The Revolt of Muhammad Ali

In 1805, the rebellion of **Muhammad Ali** freed Egypt from Ottoman rule. An officer in the Turkish forces, Muhammad Ali seized power and began to modernize Egypt until his death in 1839. He created a Western-style military, modernized agriculture (especially cotton), boosted industrialization, and recruited large numbers of European professionals to work for him and teach his people new skills. Muhammad Ali transformed Egypt into one of the world's greatest suppliers of cotton, industrializing that sector of the economy, although he worked his growers oppressively to do so.

Muhammad Ali threatened the Ottomans even more seriously when he tried to expand his borders. He took the Sudan, then went east, capturing the Sinai, Syria, parts of Arabia, and northern Iraq. He threatened the Ottoman capital, Istanbul. Afraid that he would topple the Ottomans completely, France and Britain stepped in. Recognizing Muhammad Ali as the hereditary prince (khedive) of an autonomous Egypt, the Europeans convinced him not to expand further—and in so doing, saved the Ottoman Empire. Even so, the empire had been badly injured.

## European Imperialism in North Africa

As the 1800s passed, the western parts of North Africa, now cut off from the Ottoman Empire by Egypt, fell out of the Ottomans' hands and into those of European imperialists. The French seized Algeria in 1830; more than 150,000 French settled there by the mid-1850s, and France considered Algeria to be as important to it as India was to Britain. Later, the French established a protectorate over neighboring Tunisia. Morocco fell to the French and Spanish late in the century. Libya was conquered by Italy during the Italo-Turkish War (1911–1912). This was the first war in which airplanes flew in combat, and the Italians used poison gas as well.

## The Suez Canal and English Dominance over Egypt and Sudan

Egypt fell out of the Ottoman orbit only to be sucked into the European sphere of influence. Muhammad Ali's grandson Ismail, also a reformer, decided to build a canal across the Suez land bridge that linked the Mediterranean with the Red Sea. Ismail's other modernizing efforts, which included building schools and hospitals, were helpful to Egypt. In the short term, building the Suez Canal led to European domination. A French engineer, Ferdinand de Lesseps, designed the canal, and British and French companies supervised the construction, which lasted from 1854 to 1869. The **Suez Canal** was a marvel of modern construction, and it revolutionized international shipping. However, thousands of Egyptians died during the construction, and the French and British held most of the shares in the company that owned the canal. The British bought up many French shares and, in 1875, all of Egypt's. This gave Britain an excuse to interfere in local politics. In 1881, the Egyptian military revolted against the khedive. Under the pretext of protecting their investment in the canal, the British assumed control over the region, establishing a protectorate called the Anglo-Egyptian Administration. Although the khedive technically ruled Egypt, the British controlled the government. (For other examples of Western economic dominance over regions that were not technically colonies, see Latin America and China during the late 1800s and early 1900s.)

The British extended the Anglo-Egyptian Administration southward, bringing the Sudan under its control. In the 1880s and 1890s, British authority was opposed by a religious leader and Islamic rebel known as the **Mahdi** (Arabic for "one who is rightly guided"). In 1885, the Mahdi's army massacred a British force at Khartoum, one of Britain's most stunning imperial defeats. In 1898, the British beat the Mahdi at Omdurman in a classic imperial battle in which a small European army, armed

with modern rifles and machine guns, mowed down a much larger but poorly armed indigenous force.

From the late 1800s until after the end of World War II, Egypt and North Africa remained in European hands.

## **PERSIA, THE CAUCASUS, AND CENTRAL ASIA**

Much the same pattern that applied to the Ottoman Empire and North Africa was repeated in the rest of the Middle East.

### **The Decline and Partition of Persia**

Like the Ottomans, the Persians had created a mighty gunpowder empire, the Safavid state. It remained strong through the early 1700s, but then found itself at the mercy of outside powers. To the north was Russia, which, as it modernized and Westernized, seized Persian territory in a number of wars. In the late 1700s and 1800s, Russia took portions of the Caucasus Mountains, which lay between the two countries, absorbing Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. The first two, Christian states living under the Islamic Persians, had asked Russia for help (but had not wanted to become part of the Russian Empire as they did).

The Qajar Dynasty, which ruled Persia from 1794 to 1925, was unable to resist foreign control, even though it technically ruled the country. (In this, its situation resembled China during these years.) In the 1800s, Britain and Russia cynically divided Persia into spheres of influence, allowing them to balance their rivalry in the region and flank the Ottomans. The northern zone went to Russia, the southern zone to Britain. This arrangement lasted until after World War II. British investment in Persia was heavy, especially after the discovery of oil reserves 1908.

### **The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus and Central Asia**

From the 1820s through the 1880s, the Russians waged long, intense campaigns of conquest and colonization in the Caucasus and Central Asia, home to the Silk Road khanates. The Russians conquered these regions for several reasons: nationalistic pride, natural resources (Central Asia is a great cotton-producing region), strategy (the Russians feared having a long, open southern frontier), and the hope, never realized, of driving to the Indian Ocean to establish warm-water ports. In long, bloody wars of pacification, the Russians crushed Islamic tribes in the Caucasus. Further to the east, they took Tashkent (1865), Samarkand (1868), and Bukhara (1868), driving all the way to the Afghan border.

As discussed in Chapter 23, Russian ambitions here distressed the British: Russia threatened Britain's lines of communication to India and drew near to India itself. The resulting **Great Game** of espionage and diplomatic maneuver caused much Anglo-Russian rivalry until the early 1900s.