

## INTRODUCTION

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Historians dearly cherish celebrating the anniversaries of landmark events and they are only slightly less fond of debating whether or not the celebrated event actually was a turning point in history. The present volume grew out of such an anniversary celebration. The alleged turning point event was the 1838 Anglo-Turkish Convention, a commercial agreement signed by representatives of Great Britain and the Ottoman Empire on the shores of the Bosphorus, at Balta Limanı. The scholarly occasion was its 150th anniversary, celebrated by a two-day conference that was sponsored by the Southwest Asian/North African Program and the Fernand Braudel Center at the State University of New York, Binghamton. In Middle East historiography, this free-trade agreement has been seen as the instrument that opened the economy to a massive influx of foreign imports while transforming the Ottoman Empire into a supplier of raw materials for European industry. As the conference proceeded, the participants came to agree that the Convention was not the unambiguous turning point that some accounts argue, although it may have had a greater impact on some parts of the Empire than on others. The historical analyses presented here not only provide new information, but also point to new ways of thinking about the Middle East and its evolution in modern times.

The concern for the 1838 Convention stems, of course, not merely from scholars' nostalgia, but also from an effort to understand the extraordinary events of the nineteenth century. In the hundred years before World War I, the world, including the Middle East, changed in ways which must have been difficult to comprehend. It started to fill up with people as global population began to experience the compound increases that we now take for granted. World trade increased more than 36 times as once-rare exchanges between distant regions of the globe became commonplace. Steamships, railroads, and telegraph lines provided newly-safe, regular, and frequent linkages as the world took a giant step towards its transformation into a single economy. The changes in the Middle East were also revolutionary. Its trade with Europe soared, particularly before 1870. Thereafter, the most dramatic economic events resulted from direct European investment in the region, funds that put in place a modern if sparse infrastructure

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of communications, transportation, and utilities. By 1914, there were more Middle Easterners alive, living longer and probably more comfortably than ever before. Their political forms of organization had changed dramatically or were about to. Moreover, their physical appearance was different as well; European clothing fashions increasingly took hold, along with other Western forms of popular culture, literature, and amusement.

Viewed from a global perspective, however, change in the Middle East proceeded more slowly than in most other regions of the world; the transformation was relatively less complete. As a corollary, it is also true that the Middle East was less important to the world economy in 1914 than it had been around 1800. The region remained near the political center, but had slipped sharply in economic significance. The incomplete nature of the nineteenth-century transformation of the region can be understood in quite a different way if we adopt an intra-Middle-East perspective. From this vantage point, domestic institutions were sufficiently powerful and adaptable to ward off the full effects of the expanding European political and economic universe. Thus, it is not that they failed to be fully transformed; rather, they succeeded in preserving much of their integrity.

How can we best understand these trajectories, transformations, and resistances? Belief in the 1838 Convention as the instrument responsible for change long held sway among Middle-East scholars because they considered the state as the sole legitimate object of inquiry and thus as the primary agent of history. But, in recent years, this focus on the state has been challenged, and the emphasis on 1838 has been questioned. To explore these questions, let us first turn to the Convention itself and then to variables that conference participants felt were important.

For the Egyptian portion of the Ottoman Empire, it remains true that the Convention was of central importance. Its clauses provided Britain with formal Ottoman consent for the legal dismantlement of the threatening economic system being erected by Muhammad Ali, Ottoman governor of Egypt. Thus, in a sense, the Convention separated Egypt from the Ottoman Empire as the capital abandoned its rich but obstreperous province to British expansionism. In return, Istanbul obtained greater British interest in Ottoman territorial integrity and support in the battle with its rebellious governor. With this newly-found freedom of action in Egypt, Britain then destroyed Egypt's economic viability and irretrievably launched it on the road of economic and political dependency. Thus, the importance of the Convention on

Egyptian development seems to have been on an order of magnitude quite different than when seen from the vantage point of the remainder of the Ottoman Empire. But perhaps this summary gives too much credit to the Convention. After all, in the circumstances of the nineteenth century, there were no alternative universes. If there had been no Convention, it seems very unlikely that Egypt would have evolved in a way to challenge British supremacy.<sup>1</sup>

From the Ottoman viewpoint, the Convention did formally reorganize diplomatic relations between the two empires and the conditions under which Britons and Ottomans would do business.<sup>2</sup> It gave Britain, its merchants, and its consuls more legal rights within the Ottoman frontiers than previously. On the Ottoman side, the 1838 Anglo-Turkish Convention was an important event in diplomatic history. It was not, however, a watershed in political or economic history.

The Convention was signed after history had already turned. It made its impact in the midst of momentous, ongoing economic changes. It marked a continuation rather than the initiation of a phase in European-Middle East economic and political relations.

It did not cause a vast increase in imported goods into the Ottoman Empire and it did not transform the Ottoman economy into a provider of raw materials for the expanding European economy. Instead, the agreement itself was a product of these two sets of trends that it then served to promote and enhance.

Let us first turn to foreign imports. These had been rising sharply since the mid-1750s and peaked impressively towards the end of the century. This pattern, however, has been disguised by several other historical events. First of all, the long period of wars accompanying the French Revolution seriously disrupted trade between Europe and the Ottoman Empire. When the wars ended and comparatively normal commercial conditions resumed, so did trade. Imports exploded during the 1820s and early 1830s, surpassing previous nineteenth-century levels. The eruptive quality of these increases seems less impressive, however, if the 1770s rather than the 1800–1810 period is taken as the baseline of comparison. It should also be remembered that these import increases were being achieved before the British and Ottoman representatives signed their agreement. The shift in the origins of the

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<sup>1</sup> Sayyid-Marsot (1984), as well as many authors writing from a national developmentalist perspective, takes a totally different position, arguing that British intervention destroyed a viable Egyptian economy.

<sup>2</sup> Kurmuş (1983) even challenges the degree to which it re-regulated conditions for British merchants trading in Ottoman lands.

imports also obscured the continuity between trends in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Britain replaced France as the major international trading partner of the Ottoman Empire, a shift in the data base that has obscured the fundamental continuity of the 1750–1838 period.

Turning now to Ottoman exports to Europe, we find a similar pattern, in the sense that well-established trends were interrupted by the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars and resumed with their termination. During the second half of the eighteenth century, various Middle-East regions were routinely exporting substantial amounts of raw materials, such as wool and cotton. These export levels were rising dramatically at the end of the century and were high enough not to pale in comparison to those of the nineteenth century. In common with imports, Ottoman export shipments fell during the wartime period and subsequently recommenced with a vengeance.

The structure of trade between Europe and the Middle East was not much different in 1850 than it had been during the second half of the previous century. It is true that Ottoman exports of many industrial goods had ceased by 1850, or were on the verge of vanishing. Exports of cloth from Diyarbakir and of cotton yarn from Thessalian Ambelakia, which had previously been substantial, had ceased, as had those of Ankara mohair cloth. But the economic trends after 1838 were not the product of the Convention. They did not represent radical departures from those of the second half of the eighteenth century: they were amplifications of pre-existing trends. These trends were confirmed, ratified, and promoted by the Convention, but they were not its creation.

Thus, the Treaty was not the sole originator of change in Ottoman economic history. Neither was it a turning point in Ottoman state policy as has been imagined. It was not an abandonment of protectionism or “provisionism,” as it sometimes is called, in favor of free trade. This policy shift had already occurred and had taken place over a decade before. The real turning point in Ottoman governmental economic policies was Sultan Mahmud II’s destruction of the Janissary Corps in 1826. This event is well known as the act that removed the reactionary opponents of military reform and Westernization. This, the so-called “Auspicious Event,” was a turning point in other respects as well. When the Sultan annihilated this ill-famed group, he destroyed the organized protectors of the Ottoman guilds. The Janissaries had represented the predominantly Turkish Muslim lower strata and had defended their access to the workplace. When the Janissaries fell, many

lower strata Ottoman Muslims lost their protectors. The Auspicious Event also represented a major step in the larger dismantling of the Islamic Ottoman state in which Muslims had occupied pride of place. In its stead, the government began to erect an Enlightenment European state in which all citizen/subjects were equal before the law. And further, when the Janissaries vanished, there was no organized group remaining in Ottoman society to maintain guild privilege. The state in 1826 officially turned away from the regulatory policies of the guilds that had attempted to control labor supplies, output, prices, and wages. Thereafter, although it frequently wavered, the Ottoman government generally pressed in favor of a *laissez-faire* position, unimpeded production, and open access to labor. This turn in state policy itself had evolved out of the increasing intertwining of the Ottoman and European economies during the eighteenth century. The 1826 event aligned the economies of the two regions far more closely than ever before.

The contributions by Owen, Davison, Pamuk, Toprak, and Kasaba provide general overviews of politics, diplomacy, economy, and finances—a context for the more focused studies that follow. Frangakis, Shields, and Micklewright, for their part, offer more detailed analyses, focusing on the Anatolian region of the empire.

The contributors to this volume offer a rich variety of approaches and emphases. Most were concerned not to describe but to explain: how can we understand the changes and the continuities of the nineteenth-century Middle Eastern past? Who and what were the agents? Was the state primarily responsible? Should we look to the impersonal workings of international markets or to the internal dynamics of Middle-Eastern society and economy? Some of the authors emphasize the role of the state—Ottoman, British, and Chinese. This concern is central to the contributions by Owen and Kasaba and is important for Toprak as well. Most of the remaining contributions concern the economy itself, not state economic policy.

The overall stress on economic realities instead of state policies seems consistent with the participants' shared belief that the official agreement of 1838 was not a cause but the result of ongoing economic changes. Otherwise, the emphases and foci vary considerably. Some place the accent on events in the international economy, including Micklewright's study of changing fashions in Ottoman clothing. But more focus on the internal dimensions. For example, Pamuk's confident overview of economic changes discusses not merely European demand but also domestic factors affecting the supply side. Frangakis and Kasaba dismiss the *comprador bourgeoisie* idea and instead demon-

strate the competitive struggles of local against foreign merchants.

Equally important, they reveal the sharp competition between the Ottoman Muslim and Christian merchants. All refer to the resistance of various groups to European economic penetration, a crucial topic for understanding Ottoman social and economic life.

In sum, the contributors use different, often complementary approaches to explore the nineteenth-century Middle East. Collectively, they underscore the reciprocal, complex, and continuously evolving nature of the relationship between the Middle East and the West.

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