

## Networks, Contact Zones and the Trans-Local Dimensions of the Imperial Mediterranean

Gavin Murray-Miller

Recent histories of the Mediterranean have drawn attention to the region's internal diversity and provided a basis for considering the sea and its surrounding coastal areas as a place of trans-national entanglements. While this space was a *contact zone* between cultures, the dynamics and practices of Mediterranean imperialism frequently extended beyond a strict colonizer-colonized relationship. By examining networks forged through émigré communities, journalism, religion and finances, we can rethink concepts of

the *contact zone* within a trans-imperial context. Assessing forms of engagement across and between imperial frontiers allows us to question the familiar metro-pole-periphery relationship and examine the connective webs that linked nodal cities and multiple peripheries spanning Europe, North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean.

**Key Words:** Ottoman Empire, the Mediterranean, Journalism, Syria, France, Exile

In 1897, Ottoman journalists associated with the newspaper *Meşveret* were hauled before a tribunal in Paris. The suit had been filed by the Ottoman government, which was attempting to shut down newspapers abroad run by exiles critical of the regime. The editor of *Meşveret*, Ahmet Rıza, had little intention of bowing to the will of Istanbul and Sultan Abdülhamid's authoritarian government (Hanioğlu 111-12). Rıza's intransigence drew support from various French intellectuals of the day, including the distinguished republican politician and journalist Georges Clemenceau, who chided the French government for allowing the "despot of Asia" to presume he could "dictate the law on our territory against the ideas of liberty and equity" (Clemenceau, "Pour faire plaisir au Sultan"). The trial became a *cause célèbre* that summer and reflected poorly on the Sultan. Contrary to the expectations of Istanbul, the French court refused to extradite the journalists and handed down a lenient fine that was ultimately rescinded. The Young Turks emerged triumphant from the affair, vindicated in their criticism of the sultanate and celebrated by their Parisian defenders ("Procès contre le Meşveret et la Jeune Turquie").

If dramatic, the *Meşveret* incident was only one detail in an entangled history connecting France and the Ottoman Empire

during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Riza's newspaper was one among many francophone Ottoman periodicals published at this time; other titles included *Le Libéral Ottoman*, *Turquie Contemporaine* and *L'Abeille du Bosphore*. At times, these newspapers had the potential to bring Ottoman and Muslim politics directly into the centre of Parisian political life, as the *Meşveret* affair demonstrated. Journals - some backed by the Ottoman Porte itself - debated issues relevant to Islamic governance, Pan-Islamism and France's role in the East. They lambasted enemies and engaged in sparring matches with rival newspapers in their columns, generating an Ottoman press war in the heart of France. Outside Paris, Ottoman journalists were active in London, Switzerland and Belgium. More significantly, exiles ran journals in Cairo and Alexandria. From Egypt, they had the potential to reach the populations of the Middle East and the broader Muslim world. In the age of steam and print, political debates and infighting relevant to Istanbul had the potential to migrate into different regions of the world and adapt to different political environments (Gelvin and Green and Khuri-Makdisi). Young Turk radicals were not the only groups to participate in the émigré communities taking root on the continent.

Syrians ran newspapers in European metropolises and formed clubs that became bastions of émigré political activity. By the end of the nineteenth century, notable Egyptian exiles such as Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, Mohammed 'Abduh and Yaqub Sanu were running journals in Paris and contributing to a veritable *Arab press* in the city alongside its Ottoman counterpart. In addition to promoting their own journals, certain émigrés took work as translators for the French colonial ministry, turning out Arabic-language propaganda and news articles destined for the Maghreb (Messaoudi 235-39, 411-15 and Fakkar). That Syrian and Egyptian publicists (many of them Christian) were contributing to colonial newspapers was not insignificant. These writers had been exposed to the currents of the *Nahda*, an intellectual movement focused on Arab cultural and political revival that grew up in Egypt and the Levant during the nineteenth century. They called for the "awakening of Arab nationality" under French stewardship, infusing colonial propaganda with ideas of Arab modernization ("Un Dernier mot au Montakheb"). By the turn of the century, Algerian journalists and self-identified *Young Algerian* activists were bolstering sentiments congruent with the *Nahda's* program, often embracing the discourse of Arab cultural reform

and progress to frame demands against the French colonial state. What might be gleaned from these examples is that journalism not only played a key role in fostering and sustaining exilic networks; it also served to spread ideas and discourses throughout the wider Mediterranean region. Migration, journalism and colonialism were all implicit in shaping a public sphere that was trans-imperial in nature and that had the potential to generate dialogues across frontiers. Whether these connections linked disparate imperial metropolises like Istanbul and Paris or provided conduits connecting different imperial peripheries such as the Levant-Paris-Maghreb axis, they provided points in a history of print that was both transnational and trans-imperial in scope (Hofmeyer 32). Yet, these examples also suggest that political and social networks forged through exile and colonialism were *contact zones*, geographic or discursive spaces that enabled processes of exchange and transculturation. While in Paris, Young Turks socialized with Parisian positivist circles, and these encounters had an impact on their political and intellectual outlooks. Exiles like Riza espoused ideas of universal progress and liberal republicanism, wedding them to reformist initiatives and reformulating them within the context of Ottoman modernization

(Turnaoğlu 777-805). The colonial propaganda of Christian Syrians who wrote for French newspapers distributed in Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia communicated ideas of the *Nahda* to Maghrebin reformers who subsequently blended ideas of an Arab awakening with localized issues relevant to French colonial rule and Muslim cultural concerns. By focusing on the flow and transmission of these discourses, the geographical context of the contact zone becomes extremely elastic. We move from a landscape of port cities and colonial terrains that fostered intercultural exchange to the discursive space of trans-imperial networks stitched together by nodal cities through which ideas and people circulated.

However, considering networks as contact zones requires recognizing that they are contact zones of a particular type. While Mary Louise Pratt has characterized the idea of the contact zone as a place where “cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34), we might examine trans-imperial flows within a different framework. The nineteenth-century Mediterranean was an imperial space, but those who operated within it were never completely dominated by imperial power structures and ideologies (Burton 325-28). Movements across

empires transcended strict colonizer-colonized relationships, and the communities and print networks that spanned imperial boundaries connected metropolises and peripheries in different ways. Drawing attention to forms of engagement across and between imperial frontiers allows us to question the familiar metropole-periphery relationship and examine the connective webs that linked cities with multiple peripheries on a regional and trans-continental scale. It also permits us to examine how ideas were adapted to local circumstances and to theorize about how vernacular and cosmopolitan discourses often interacted with and informed one another (Green 846-74).

A case in point was the Crimean Tatar reformer Ismail Gasprinskii who in 1908 set up an office at the Hotel Minerva in the European quarter of Cairo and ran the short-lived newspaper *Al-Nahda*. Earlier, Gasprinskii had addressed issues concerning the Tatar national *awakening* and Muslim cultural reform in the Russian Empire. In Egypt, however, he expanded his message to attract an Arab readership, and in the process articulated his reformist ideas within a universalist discourse that extended beyond Tatar nationalism or even Russian imperial politics. In the pages of *Al-Nahda*, Gasprinskii called for modernization, education and female emanci-

pation, urging Arab readers to embrace the progress of modern “civilization” (Kuttner 397). He did not mean “Western” civilization, he was careful to note, but “human” civilization and the progress evident across history, from early human societies to Islam and Europe (Kuttner 397). Moving from his native Crimea and establishing himself temporarily in Egypt, Gasprinskii associated his writing with the universalism that was coming to define Pan-Islamic rhetoric in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Muslim publicists promoted modernization and rejected colonial ideas of belatedness and cultural inferiority, they expressed faith in the unity of humanity and the ability of all cultures to attain *civilization*. This optimism drew upon the concepts and values of the Enlightenment, but recast them in a world context applicable beyond Europe (Aydin 35-63).

The emergence of a trans-imperial public sphere spanning the Afro-Eurasian continent did not erode the significance of the local so much as it provided opportunities to reimagine the contours of the local in global terms. At the same time Gasprinskii was accommodating his modernist agenda to an international audience in Egypt, proponents of Ottoman reform were attracting the attention of the world as the Young Turk Revolution erupted.

Given the Ottoman press that grew up in Paris during the late nineteenth century, it was hardly surprising that the revolution of 1908 would see a flourish of journalistic activity in the French capital. That year, Syrian émigrés set up the *Amis de l'Orient association*, which held banquets in Paris and advocated for a liberal and inclusive revolution from afar. As the journalist Shukri Ghanem remarked, it was now time “to prove to the world” that Ottoman society could be brought into conformity with modernity (“Macédoine”). To a certain extent, he was correct. The world was watching, and this denouement said much about the networks forged by Ottoman émigrés and the Pan-Islamic politics endorsed by Sultan Abdülhamid over the course of the late nineteenth century. From the Americas to Africa and Asia, people commented on the upheavals occurring in Istanbul and the Near East. Newspapers in cities as disparate as Cape Town, Mumbai, London, Jakarta and Cairo all reported and pronounced on the activities of the Young Turks. The leaders themselves envisioned their movement within global parameters, situating their revolution in a chain of other liberal and modernizing revolutions extending from the Meiji Ishan to recent constitutional movements in Russia and Persia. Indeed, the Young Turk Revolution became imagined

as the latest surge in a “global wave” of revolution believed to be progressively transforming the non-Western world (Sohrabi 49-79).

Exilic networks, trans-imperial political formations and the international press: all came together to transform the Young Turk Revolution into a global event. In the coming years, moreover, these structures became embedded within broader regional dynamics that cut across the imperial Mediterranean as the Ottoman revolution progressed. When Italy invaded Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in 1911, Ottoman authorities were forced to rely on existing Pan-Islamic networks to fight a colonial war. The Young Turks mobilized Arab clients in Libya through appeals to Pan-Islamic solidarity and encouraged international recruits to wage jihad against the invading Italian forces. As Shakib Arslan, a Syrian Arab and committed Pan-Islamic Ottomanist, claimed in 1911, the aim was to “defend the fatherland” and “attract martyrs to its cause” (Cleveland 21). The conflict spurred independent and semi-official Islamic charitable and aid networks into action, eliciting a flood of international Pan-Islamic sympathies. Algerians and Tunisians organized collections for the wounded. Newspapers across North Africa urged co-religionists to donate to the Red

Crescent and help their suffering brethren (“Pour les blessés turcs”, “Souscription au profit des blessés victimes du conflit Italo-Turc”). Doctors and journalists from as far away as India set sail for Cairo or Istanbul and onward to Libya to offer their assistance and report on the war. Pan-Islamic humanitarianism raised millions of dollars in contributions between 1911 and 1914, and the transfer and management of these funds were actualized through the structures of imperial governance and global finance (O’Sullivan 213-16). In the throes of a militarized humanitarian crisis, journalistic, political, religious and aid networks all converged as the Eastern Mediterranean became a locus of trans-local concurrence.

The events of the early twentieth century trace the contours of a more open and expansive idea of the Mediterranean region. This perspective requires looking beyond the region’s internal diversity to take account of its connections to places such as continental Europe and subcontinental Asia, as well as its position within international economic and migratory flows (Burke 911-12). As a crossroads of various imperial projects throughout the period between the 1830s and the 1960s, the Mediterranean was subject to the push and pull of competing imperial and trans-imperial currents that linked Europe,

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Asia and Africa and in certain instances spanned the Atlantic (Clancy-Smith and Isabella and Zanou). Each thread encouraged its own forms of cultural contact, and each was bound together by its own emotional and social ties. In examining the array of networks that cut across imperial borders and jurisdictions, we can glimpse them as constellations that at times aligned to expose the trans-local dimensions of a Mediterranean convergence. Such an approach requires examining the overlap that existed between networks and the imbricative borders fused through newspaper subscriptions, aid organizations, Sufi orders, Pan-Islamic propaganda, colonial agents and international financial brokers. The synergies that these enabled ultimately furnished the context for conceptualizing the imperial Mediterranean as a global space.

Situating the Mediterranean at the nexus of larger regional and global influences brings into sharp relief the relationships that have historically bound Europe, Africa and Asia together. Understanding these networks and connections, moreover, remains relevant to the world today. At present, exiles from Egypt, Syria and North Africa have taken refuge in Europe in the wake of the Arab Spring. Many continue to pursue liberal and democratic causes in their host countries and are frequently in

dialogue with the politics of their home regions. Migrants coming from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and sub-Saharan Africa via North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean have generated conflicts over European identity, borders and immigration policies on the continent (Davis and Serres). Reflecting on how and in what measure the Mediterranean has facilitated a historic Afro-Eurasian contact zone places these contemporary circumstances within a longer continuum. Islam Lotfy, an activist who participated in the Egyptian uprisings of 2011 and currently lives in London, was prescient when remarking on the recent political unrest taking place in Algeria, Libya and the Sudan, insisting, "history repeats itself" (Kirkpatrick, "Arab Spring, Again?"). Looking back to a period when émigré activists and writers, politics and military conflicts brought Europe, Africa, and the Middle East together, Lotfy's remark acquires a deeper historical significance.

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